Space Knights: Volume II, The Questing

By Gregory Samuelson

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Dedication

For my family, especially my wife Christi and stepson Hunter, and my mom Judy, and in-laws Walter and Judy Kraus. And in memory of Glenda, my Grandmother Marjorie Westover, Dad Ivar, Aunt Twi, Nora and Glenn. You will always live in my memory “Till the Breaking of the Sky.”

Acknowledgment

First and foremost I thank God and my Lord and Savior Jesus for giving me this story to tell and sticking with me. No earthly words can express my thanks. Thank you for the imagination you gave me and my family that loves and supports me. In writing this work there have been many things that have happened in my life. I must give a special thank you to my wife Christi and her son. Thank you Christi and Hunter for your love and welcoming me to your family. Thank you Christi for your love and encouragement and waking my heart. I would like to acknowledge my late wife Glenda for her assistance. She continued to listen to my rough passages and give me feedback till her passing from cancer. I can’t wait for the Breaking of the Sky and see you again. I must thank my dad, Ivar Samuelson, for designing and building the greatest toy wooden swords of all time and being the ideal villain for a young knight. I need to acknowledge my brother Carl. It is some of our adventures that we made up that stayed with me all these years and led to my writing this work. I also need to thank my mother Judy for her abundance of love and encouragement. Thank you Elizabeth Lundquist and her friend Amber for your help in proofreading. Once again thank you God and my Savior Jesus for all you have done for me. Please keep Glenda and Paul in your loving arms safe and sound in Heaven, our special angels who are watching over us “Till the Breaking of the Sky.”

Also by Gregory Samuelson

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Prologue

The massive battleship sailed through space. Its hull measured eight hundred feet long and one hundred and fifty feet wide and its arsenal of crossbow turrets were armed and vigilant. The ship’s six Helix drive engines built into the triangular wings, three engines per wing, roared like dragon fire near maximum velocity. The dark gray emblem of a harpy buzzard, sometimes called a carrion falcon, above a dark planet symbolized this ship as a Boulthorian battleship. An escort of four Arrow Cruisers surrounded the battleship for extra protection from the Althorian space fleet.

The Arrow Cruisers, half the size of the battleship, carried twice the arsenal of crossbow cannons with a variety of explosive-tipped arrowheads. Swift and agile, they out-maneuvered every other space vessel making them perfect escorts. They functioned exceptionally for this quick jaunt across space. Regular battleships would have been slower and more easily seen and monitored.

King Axlor of Boulthora had ordered this immediate flight across the stars to his outpost on the planet Althora. He needed to inspect the ancient key and ensure its security. Axlor brought a division of knights to leave at the outpost then rushed out to his personal transport craft and flew back to the Battleship Volutus waiting for him in orbit. As soon as he boarded he ordered Admiral Courak to take off at top speed back to Boulthora with their escort of four Arrow Cruisers before he headed for his chambers to relax, leaving Courak to communicate with Boulthora’s main ally, the Sphinx.

Admiral Courak commanded Volutus, the flagship of the Boulthorian space fleet. A tall and wiry man, Courak sat in his office using his kythersig, a personal communications device built into his desk with a twenty-inch screen.

“We are heading back to Boulthora now,” Courak said, addressing a being with a contemptuous human face.

The Sphinx spoke with a surly voice, “Very good. I left our other associate, and I’m returning to Pyramar. In three days, I’ll be in touch with Axlor to give him new instructions. Good speed to you.” The image of the Sphinx faded and the screen went blank.

Courak sat back and rubbed his chin. They had left the orbit of Althora, that pesky noble world, only four hours ago. Axlor, on board in his private chambers, left Courak instructions not to be disturbed. Courak stood as the desk and the kythersig automatically folded and lowered back into the floor. He left his quarters and headed down the short hall to the bridge. On entering, he strode to his command chair, stopping short when he saw it occupied.

“So, what did Bazar say?” asked King Axlor. He wore his dark gray armor and a black surcoat with the image of a silver panther embroidered on the front. His huge six-foot, seven-inch frame reclined in the captain’s chair, and his dark eyes shone at his Admiral with curious interest.

Courak bowed his head and saluted his King before replying, “Bazar wanted to know where we were and if you checked the outpost on Althora.”

Axlor sat straighter and nodded his head. Unconsciously his cheek twitched in agitation.

Courak perceived the king's twitch and took a calming breath before proceeding with the report. “Bazar added that he left a meeting with another contact and was headed back to Pyramar.”

“Anything else Bazar had to say?” Axlor asked as his cheek twitched again.

“Bazar said plans were set in motion, and in three days he’ll have instructions for you. Oh, and one last item. You are to increase your efforts to capture Corena,” Courak added, unsure of the king’s reaction.

Axlor nodded and stood. This is good news, he thought. A slow grin spread on his face as he stretched and looked around the bridge. Various plans, thoughts, and fears vied for attention in his mind. He concentrated and focused on the present. With luck the Althorians were ignorant of his arrival and departure. He could relax when they returned and concentrate on the plan to capture Corena, the princess of the kingdom of Cator on Althora. He took a step forward when the communications officer turned respectfully to the king.

“Sire, there is an incoming transmission from our agent on Althora. He wishes to speak to you at once.”

Axlor raised his eyebrows in surprise. He had not contacted this spy on Althora for months. The spy, code-named Dew, gave him very reliable information. Last year Dew reported three instances of Corena’s location for raiding parties to capture her. And to Axlor’s fury, Corena’s escort of Golden Griffins, the elite Althorian knights, had protected her. No explanation would satisfy him for their failures. However, the information from Dew had been accurate. She had been exactly where he had reported her to be each time.

Axlor paused before addressing the communications officer. “Let’s hear Dew’s report. Put him on the main viewer,” he instructed.

“Yes, your highness,” the communications officer replied and then turned to his controls. A moment later, an image appeared on the main viewer to the left of the forward windows of the bridge.

Dew’s image appeared shadowed and pixilated with the coding program he used to mask his appearance. “Your highness, I have some news for you,” said the digitally altered voice. If Axlor had wished, he could have glanced behind him toward the communications station and seen the signal coming from Althora being bounced around several communications satellites to further hide him from detection.

“What do you have for me this time?” Axlor asked casually.

“Sire, I have a quick report, and an idea that may interest you,” Dew stated.

“Oh,” Axlor responded. “Give me your report and I might consider your idea.”

“As you know, Corena graduated from school and will probably travel to Voilend for Preliminary training and then on to Gaffordsville to train as a Lady Golden Griffin. While in transit, she’ll be under a light guard of only one division of Golden Griffins. She will be vulnerable until she arrives in the city and the training camp. There she will be heavily guarded. You will have a narrow slit of time to catch her on the road. However, I propose a simpler solution,” Dew said.

King Axlor waited to hear more.

“Provided my information is correct, Corena will be appointed to captain a division of Lady Golden Griffins and stationed at a local outpost. We could gather a large war party and swoop down and assault it. With your superior numbers the outpost won’t stand a chance, then you’ll have her. All is moving forward in your favor.”

Axlor sat stunned. He had not expected this. Dew always gave accurate information and stayed out of planning. However, this thought was intriguing. Yes, events kept moving in his favor. No need to rush. This may be exactly what he needed. “I’ll consider your idea and get back to you. Keep monitoring her. We will continue the small assaults on Althora. A sting here and a sting there, then we will pounce and she will be ours. Let me know when she is ripe to be plucked.”

“Yes, your highness,” replied Dew and in a moment the image faded and went blank. Courak and the bridge crew looked to their king.

Suddenly, one of the security knights on the bridge asked a question that immediately brought silence, “I’m surprised he did not mention the failed assault on the end of year tournaments and the rumor of the Griffin General.”

Most of the bridge crew had heard bits of the prophecies. The title brought about both fear and hatred at the same time. They knew the concept if not the whole contents of the prophecies surrounding this figure. Human, Griffin, or some other being with the title, would bring about the end of the Sphinx rule in the galaxy, thus ending the power of all the allies of the Sphinx. It would ruin their rule. The Sphinx insisted this person be eradicated. A report had circulated through the Boulthorian fleet that the first prophecy had been fulfilled.

Axlor’s cheek twitched as he glared at the knight for bringing up this topic. It was bad enough that there had been failure to capture Corena, now to be reminded that this person could be out there raised his ire. Sucking in a deep breath, he stepped over to the knight and with a swift move of the hand he reached out and grabbed the man by the throat and shoved him against the wall.

“We are looking for this Griffin General, aren’t we? If such a person exists the Griffins would be gloating about him would they not? As far as I’m concerned he is just a myth. If someone comes forward and declares himself this Griffin General, what will we do?” Axlor rumbled. In a softer, deadlier voice he added, “If he does show up, we will fall on him like an avalanche and he will be swept away. Now return to your duty and do not speak to me of this again, or you will find yourself transferred to the Zelloth division.” Just as swiftly Axlor took his hand away from the man, turned with a grace that defied his size, and strode to the door that opened out for him. In two strides, he was out of sight.

The knight stood still and panted. He knew very well that the king meant what he said. His mind reeled that his comment would cause such a stir and that the king would threaten to send him to the absolute worst unit in the Boulthorian army. A man’s life expectancy in that outfit of rubes, jackals, and criminals was four months. The Zelloth division was sent on the worst missions, where chances were not one of them would survive. To be transferred into this unit, you might as well write your will and pray for a swift death. If the enemy did not kill you, one of your own would, maybe to get ahead or maybe for no reason at all.

Courak looked at the man and snorted, “You heard the King, get back to your post and keep your mouth shut.” Courak took his seat, turned to the forward viewers, and watched the stars. Maybe we’ll finally get some action soon, he thought as he regarded the ship’s reports. Soon your majesty, we’ll have what we need to bring the Althorians to their knees.

The Boulthorian ships swiftly sped toward their home world. They had no way of knowing that events were about to unfold around them.

It was that twilight time, just before the dawn, the mysterious time when there are infinite possibilities to the day. Decisions and plans could be made that had endless pathways that could lead to ruin or redemption for the galaxy. With a nudge of grace one path in the dark had a moment of light to show the first step. And at that moment a youth slept dreaming of taking it.

Chapter 1

Summer Preparation

Summer vacation, the best time of year, when kids go out and play or relax, or in some cases for the older kids in their teen years, find part time jobs. They worked for the money that they could use on clothes, music, set aside to go to the universities, or their future, or just to have enough to pay for entertainment and fun. Entertainment came in many forms, motion picture shows, live theatre, arcades, sporting events, or in some lucky instances dates. Ah, summer romance.

The work the older teens found also came in many forms. Some worked at local restaurants, whether the fast food variety, or full service. There was quite a number to choose from. One in particular served fire roasted sager, an animal that was a cow sized boar. Other teens sought out retail positions in the shops at the local malls and small stores in their towns. Little did they know as they worked, they were gathering valuable skills for life after graduating from school and officially joining the workforce. They learned skills in many facets to help make them better future employees and citizens of the kingdom. Skills came in just as many types, from managing money, taking care of customers, taking pride in how stores looked and presenting merchandise or honing culinary skills and preparing and presenting food.

Then there were those late teens that were in that stage between youth and becoming an adult. Of them there were those about to join the workforce and some that were just trying to enjoy this last summer before joining the military and becoming a pawn, knight, or Golden Griffin. Some even sought knight positions in the air defense, the naval fleet, or the space fleet. These noble young men and women just wanted to enjoy every moment they could after graduation before getting inducted as a knight. Trance was one of those young men.

His given name Terrance Sonderson; however, everyone called him Trance. When he was five years old his cousin Jean had mispronounced his name and gave him the nickname. The name stuck and he had been called Trance ever since. Somehow this had never bothered him and he actually thought fondly of it. Jean was a little over a year older than him and now owned a shop for holiday decorations, something he had always been interested in.

Trance wasn’t interested in just some summer job in retail or food service. He had slightly grander thoughts. Besides, he had already lined up a summer job that would give him some money and keep him busy and out of trouble. He was going to mow lawns for some older couples in the neighborhood. It had been his favorite job back home eons ago.

In the 1950’s on Earth Trance’s great-grandfather, an astronomer at the observatory at Mt. Evans Colorado, had found what was just thought to be a tenth planet in the solar system. Soon the discovery of the planet became a threat. He and his team of fellow astronomers discovered the planet was on a collision course with the Earth. Over several years the governments of Earth planned and built a fleet of global escape ships. These were the most advanced spaceships built on Earth and were powered by a newly discovered element, pomponium. Several scientific advancements were incorporated in the ships. One of the most important was the invention of the deep sleep chambers.

These chambers put the passengers in suspended animation while they traveled through space. Even deep sleep chambers for pets, zoo animals, and various livestock had been built. Vividly Trance remembered the day his family had gone out to the launch site in Colorado where the global escape ship they were to board and take off in, the Sparrow XIV, sat and waited for them. There was a lot that had taken place that day leading up to his family lining up and then heading toward the spaceship that looked like a huge airliner. The one memory that haunted him happened as he got close to the portable stairs for boarding the ship. Trance had always been watchful and noticed everything around him and at that very moment he saw something that had no explanation.

He remembered looking around at the trees in the distance and heard birds singing and then he looked off and was taken by surprise to see two men looking at him. One he had never seen before. The man seemed to have a glow about him and he was wearing a white lab coat. The other man was his grandfather. Trance could not believe it and looked away for a moment in shock and then looked back only to see that the men had disappeared. He knew what he saw; then how could he have seen his grandfather. Granddad had passed away just a few years before the launch day. At that time he was not able to process what he had seen. In moments he was at the bottom of the stairs and had to climb up.

His grandfather, Claude, had always been close to him and was always interested in what he was doing. Trance had heard that Claude had a dream about him a little over a year before he was born. Just recently at his graduation Trance found out that Claude had done something amazing for him. The morning after his grandfather’s dream, he had bought a bowie knife with an eagle head at the base of the handle. His dad had kept the knife and had it stored on the ship as they left the Earth. Trance had always been proud that his dad and Claude, both astronomers like his great grandfather, had found the planet in the Andromeda galaxy that they were to escape to.

Trance learned from his parents and the CKN, known as the Catorian Kingdom News station on Althora, that as the global escape ships were approaching their destination a Boulthorian battleship out on patrol decided that the ships were a threat so it attacked. Fortunately the Sparrow XIV’s computers had detected the incoming explosive headed arrows and tried to evade them and then expelled its passengers to save them. The expulsion worked and the passengers in their deep sleep chambers escaped and would land on the planet Althora. The ship was destroyed.

Miracle of miracles Trance and his family and the other passengers of the Sparrow XIV had survived their trip across space and the assault of the Boulthorian battleship; however, the deep sleep chamber Trance was in drifted from his family and crash landed in the woods just outside a farm two hundred miles away from his family. They had landed at Caldora, the capital of Cator. He had a great summer on the farm, staying there until a Boulthorian troop of knights assaulted the nearby town. He successfully defended the farm and chose to separate from the farmer, Chorus Markem, and his family and lead some of the Boulthorian knights away to give Chorus and his family time to get away.

Trance eventually made his way to another town and there met Princess Corena and the Golden Griffins escorting her. While traveling with them they were attacked by the Boulthorians and he helped defend Corena. As a reward she had given him the robot horse that he had been allowed to ride. It also happened that one of the Golden Griffins knew his family and days later he was reunited with them. Back with his family his life returned to normal as school was about to start again and he had his last year in school. That had been another adventure as he learned so much about his new home world and the surrounding solar systems and planets. Even better, he had even joined the knight class.

Back on Earth he had loved learning about medieval times and knights and here he could live his dream and be a knight. Finally he had the fantastic fortune to fall for Corena who attended his school. Of course there were trials, such as his chief rival in Rex, the captain of the White Knights, a rival school, and he was Corena’s ex-boyfriend. Rex was a cad and a bully and Corena had finally had enough of Rex’s rude and cheating behavior and dumped him. This did not settle well with him and really put him in a rage. Rex really went into a rage when at a tournament Corena had publicly presented Trance a lady’s favor, a silk scarf that she tied on his arm. He carried the scarf with him the rest of the year.

At the end of the school year Trance and his team had entered the end of year tournaments. As a team they finished on top winning the Castle Assault and Defense tournament and the Battlefield event. Many of his teammates had fared very well this year in their individual events. Trance went on to win the Swordsman Challenge and Swordsman Joust. He didn’t come out unscathed. In the Ax Man’s Joust a large boy by the name of Golic rode against him and with a huge swing unhorsed Trance in the most brutal way. Trance vividly remembered lying on the ground looking up for what seemed like hours trying to draw a breath. Golic did not get to celebrate his victory of unhorsing Trance long. Hamon, Trance’s friend and captain of the Armorites, rode against him and eliminated him from the tournament.

And now graduation was fresh in his memory. He had graduated with higher grades than he had ever scored in the past, grades that he needed so he could try to join the Golden Griffins. As he was going to be a knight his mother had made him a surcoat and presented it to him at graduation. She had taken a great deal of pride in making the hunter green surcoat with its golden mountain lion embroidered on it. Trance was very proud of the surcoat and had it hanging in a prominent place in his room to show it off. His mom had also presented him with his dagger that he would take with him as he trained to be a Golden Griffin, or at the very least a knight. The dagger was, in fact, the bowie knife with the eagle head handle that his grandfather had bought.

Trance had seen many different daggers presented at graduation to the members of his team of Gray Mountain Warriors. In particular the large almost chef’s knife of his friend Gracer Karry, and the black handled double edged traditional dagger of Zam Welts, and the antler handled hunting knife of Mandor Frith. He also remembered the slim double-edged dagger of Corena that had a rosebud pommel. These memories floated through his mind as he lay where he was in his bed among rumpled and tossed about bedding.

He needed sleep right now as he lay on his left side with his right leg stretched out and his arms thrown over his head. Exhaustion had caught up with him last night. To make some money for himself this summer, he had posted advertisement flyers in town for lawn mowing service. Back on Earth when he was twelve, he got his first lawn mowing job and every summer until the day of the global exodus he had mowed a number of lawns. He was good and thorough mowing and trimming the lawns he took care of. Most of his customers were elderly neighbors of his family and friends of his Grandmother. Now, once again, he was out in the neighborhood mowing.

And this summer was different in another way. He had needed to go to the town counsel and apply for a temporary license to put up his flyer and get a tax form to have his customers sign so he could pay the seven percent tax of his wages while mowing. The electric powered lawn mower was sleek and looked like one he had seen advertised back on Earth. The trimmer was a much lighter and sleeker model to those he had used in the past. And his somewhat celebrity status had many people wanting him to mow their lawn. He had mowed six lawns yesterday, each one taking him about an hour and a half to do. He was averaging five a day with none on the weekend thankfully. That was a lot since there were ten days in a week on Althora. He was now up to forty customers with more trying to get his services. By the time he had finished the last lawn it had been dinnertime. He ate and relaxed for a couple hours and then went to bed.

Just before laying down to sleep, he sat in his room and prayed. He had been raised as a Christian. As a strong believer he prayed often. It was this belief that brought him calm and peace any time things seemed to go wrong. Not much had gone wrong lately; however, he believed that when things are going right for a while, eventually something happens. Sometimes when something would happen to him he would have a dream that would somehow forewarn him. He never thought of it being psychic, just sometimes a dream would trouble him and usually within a few days or even a couple weeks later something would come up and test his faith and patience. Most times the dream had nothing to do with the actual event. Tonight as he tossed and rolled over to his right side and swung his left leg out, he was searching for the princess and encountering a huge snake in the process.

Suddenly the dream changed and a Boulthorian knight wielding a sword and a long oval shield confronted him. Trance was dressed in armor with his surcoat on and was standing unarmed. Then he had a sword in his hand; it’s amazing how dreams work! Just then the Boulthorian knight stopped and stumbled back. Trance approached him and in one dream-like stroke cut the knight down. Immediately he sensed something and turned and saw the largest snake he had ever seen. He had to act. He pivoted and swung the sword and the snake disappeared. As dreams will, the scene changed and he was now searching for Corena in a building. Not just any building, it must be a castle of some kind, and he knew deep down that he was searching for the dungeons. Coming to a heavily guarded door that must be her cell he marched toward the guards, swung his sword left and right and defeated all of the guards.

He felt his pulse race and tossed again in bed as his dream-self sought the key to the door. There the key was, and he found himself in another corridor. Strange, he didn’t feel the immediate pull to find the princess, yet there was something important here. He searched until he was before another door hidden in the far recess of the corridor. The door opened; he wasn’t sure how. Had it been open or had he needed a key. Trance entered the room and found an ancient case covered with so much dust it must have been here for centuries. His hand acted on its own and smashed the glass. As the shattering sound vibrated in his mind he beheld of all things, a key. Suddenly he was jarred awake by something nearby shattering and a scream.

Trance bolted upright in bed panting for air. He blinked his eyes in the early morning sun shining through his bedroom window. His head turned this way and that taking in his room as the images of his dream slowly faded from his thoughts. The shattering glass; was it just in his dream- and who had screamed? Then he heard someone swear. Tossing his blankets, he quickly stood and grabbed a pair of fleece pants, slippers, and a cotton shirt. He dressed quickly and left his bedroom, and headed down the short hall to find his mother in the kitchen with a broom and dustpan in hand.

“Hey mom, can I help you?” he asked as he entered the kitchen and saw the broken mixing bowl on the floor.

Eileen looked up, grateful to see him standing there ready to help. “Sure,” she replied and handed him the broom then stepped out of his way, still holding the dustpan. She watched as he carefully swept the mess together in a pile. “Here,” she said as she leaned over and placed the dustpan near the pile for him to sweep the rubbish into. In just a couple minutes the mess was cleaned up. She was glad and grateful for his presence. It had seemed a miracle to her the day the troop of Golden Griffins with Princess Corena had shown up last summer and left him with his family. Now she treasured every moment of having him home. It will be too soon when he leaves for his initial training to be a Golden Griffin. She loved her other three children just as much, but there was something about Trance that she cherished. Probably it was because he was the eldest, or rather her eldest biological child. There was also the dream that her father in-law had over a year before he was born.

Kyle, her adopted son, was roughly a year older than Trance and had already become a knight serving King Maximus and the kingdom of Cator. Then there was her daughter Heather, the only girl. She was three years younger than Trance and still in school. Her third child was little Sammy. He was three years younger than Heather and starting to come into his own, making friends along with Heather and running around the neighborhood.

With the broken glass mixing bowl cleaned up Eileen turned to her son, “Trance could you get me one of the other mixing bowls. Get me the medium metal bowl this time.”

Trance went over to the cabinets and bent down and opened the right door, looking in to retrieve the appropriate bowl, and handed it to his mother. He stepped back and watched as she took out her measuring cups and pulled forward her canister of flour. “What are you going to fix for breakfast this morning?” he asked as she opened the refrigerator.

“I’m planning on making biscuits and gravy this morning,” she replied as she took out a stick of butter and a package of sausage. In moments she had measured the butter, put it in the mixing bowl, and proceeded to measure in the flour and the rest of her ingredients. Then she began mixing the biscuits.

“Is there something I can do, Mom?” Trance asked. “I could start frying the sausage,” he volunteered. He had learned how to cook when he was in middle school. In sixth grade he had taken a Home Economics class to learn cooking basics. After the class was over he continued to learn from his mother and grandmother. With all that had happened since the global exodus he had not had an opportunity to help cook. This might be a good time to help out.

Eileen took a moment to think about his offer. It had been a long time since he had helped her in the kitchen and it would be nice for a change. Who knew how many times this might happen for him to help in the kitchen before he was gone for his training. “Well okay, you can start frying the sausage while I finish making the biscuits.”

Trance smiled as he picked up the sausage from the counter and carried it to the stove. Moments later he had a frying pan on the stove and was busy frying the sausage as his mother finished mixing the biscuit dough, rolling it out and then cutting and placing them on a baking sheet. Soon the biscuits were in the oven and Eileen took over from Trance with the sausage. She added flour, seasoning, and milk to make the sausage gravy. The smell of breakfast floated through the house as Trance sat back at the kitchen table and waited for everything to finish cooking.

It didn’t take long for the other members of the family to come strolling toward the kitchen. Heather arrived first followed by Sammy from down the hall. Then finally Evan, Trance’s dad, came upstairs with a sleepy grin on his face. “That smells wonderful,” he said as he made his way to the table.

With breakfast almost ready Heather helped Trance set the table and the family sat for a moment of prayer before digging in. While they ate, Eileen asked what everyone would be up to today. “I’m going with Wendee to the mall to look around,” Heather said. Her best friend had told her yesterday that the new fashions would be put out today at her favorite shop and she had been saving up her allowance to go and get a new outfit for the next school year.

“My friend Bobbin wants to come over and show me that new video game today. He says it’s really cool. You are a chariot driver running a race across the kingdom. The graphics look real,” replied Sammy. He had really taken to the new types of video games and enjoyed them all. Evan and Eileen previewed most of the games he played. They approved of most of them since they were educational as well as fun and entertaining. Evan had seen the game that Bobbin would bring over and had checked it out and liked the fact that it would teach Sammy more about the kingdom where they lived.

“What about you Trance? What do you have planned for today?” Eileen asked.

“I only have four lawns to do today. It seems everyone wants me to mow for them this summer. I don’t know how I’m going to add anyone else to the schedule unless I mow every other week for them,” Trance replied. With steady income from mowing, he tried to be careful with his money by setting aside the seven percent for tax, trying to save all he could, and not overspend. Of course there was his book collection he was adding to as he kept up his reading.

Trance learned in his government class about the tax system of Althora and especially of Cator. In particular the tax in the Kingdom of Cator was seven percent of a person or company’s income or profits. This was the same percentage for everyone and every company, no loopholes at all. The boundary age was seventeen. Anyone seventeen and younger who was working paid five percent. Right after turning eighteen the percent goes up to the full seven. There was also a two percent sales tax on groceries, four percent on almost everything else, and seven percent on jewelry and luxury items.

After breakfast Trance went to his room and got dressed. He kissed his mom on the cheek as he passed her again on his way to the stairs and out the door. Once outside he went to the large double garage and opened it up. Inside he saw his parent’s carriage with its two robot horses in the bay nearest the house. The carriage was a nice shade of blue with touches of gray here and there. The carriage was four years old and was made by Callavord. It was a six-passenger carriage called a Victorine. In the second bay stood his robot horse Odin.

Trance took a lot of pride in what he had accomplished with Odin. Not only did he ride the horse in his knight class competitions, he had taken a lot of time to update the horse so he could ride him when he became a Golden Griffin. At present the horse was in sleep mode and was plugged into a nearby power outlet. The robot horses attached to the carriage were also in sleep mode and were plugged into power outlets to recharge. All robot horses were run by a series of powerful power pods that were charged by either being plugged directly into an electric socket or when on the road, they had solar panels that continuously kept them fully charged. Internal monitors let the rider know how the horse’s power supply was holding up. With careful monitoring a horse could keep going for twenty-two hours without needing a full recharge.

Trance smiled and patted Odin as he passed him on his way to the back of the garage to get the mower and trimmer. He slung a haversack with extra power pods for the trimmer and mower on his left shoulder. One advantage to this mower and trimmer was that they used the same type of power pod.

Trance slung the trimmer to his shoulder with his left hand and pushed the mower with his right hand. Five minutes later he arrived at his first house and after setting the mower, trimmer, and haversack aside he went to the door and politely knocked. Moments later, after talking to his customer he started the mower and started to work. An hour and a half later he was done and to the door to get paid. Collecting his tools he moved on to the next customer. As he walked his mind wandered to his future. He also thought about church and God.

He had been raised as a Christian back on Earth. As such he believed in God, that Jesus was his son and Messiah of the world, and that Jesus fulfilled the ancient prophecies of the Old Testament. Trance knew that there had been quite a religious debate before the global exodus. Many religious leaders and many Christians did not believe in the global disaster. His family held that, if the disaster was coming, God had given man the intelligence and imagination to solve the problem.

Since his arrival on Althora, especially after he had been reunited with his family, he had gone to a church here. He had also taken to reading the Althorian Bible. This Bible had eight sections, or Testaments. Starting with the Most Ancient Testament, the Ancient Testament, the Old Testament, the Fulfillment Testament, First Redemption Testament, Second Redemption Testament, the Prophecies of Jamuous, and the Universal Revelation were each unique and enlightening. As Trance read his Bible and talked with the minister, he had come to the theory that was gaining ground as more ministers from Earth worked with their new associates in ministry. The theory that they were working on was that the Old Testament and the Fulfillment Testament were the same as the two Testaments in the Earth Bible.

As he walked, he thought about the theory. He knew what he believed in the Bible, and he was fascinated with the other Testaments. Altogether it was an incredible story that went beyond the creation of the world, as he knew it and the familiar Bible stories leading to the New Testament and the stories of Jesus' birth, life and lessons, and his death and resurrection. There were even the prophecies of Jesus’ return and the redemption of the world. Now he was learning that in the Most Ancient and Ancient Testaments was the story of the creation of the Universe. Stories of the Olorians, Griffins, and Sphinx were exciting. Also, there was the story of the founding of various worlds in the galaxy including Althora and Boulthora. There was a curious tale of the coming of humans from a distant planet referred to as Talenth. Trance dwelled for a moment on the theory that the Old Testament and Fulfillment Testament were the Bible from Earth. How could this be? He was quite sure that Jesus was indeed not only God’s son and the Messiah of Earth; Jesus was the Lord of Lords and King of Kings and the savior of the entire Universe.

He was almost to his next customer now, so, like before, he set the mower, trimmer, and haversack aside and walked to the door. A little over an hour and a half later he made his way to the third customer. Another lawn was done and now to the last lawn of the day. His mind switched to the Markems, the family that he had stayed with last summer before the raid on their town. He had truly enjoyed living with them that summer and thought of them as his second family; however, he regretted that after he had found his family he had not talked to them through the year as much as he would have liked. Chorus was his friend Gracer’s uncle. Occasionally he had seen the Markems at events, as they would come to see him and Gracer compete. It was quite a trip for them as they lived just outside Kelm, a town two hundred miles away to the east of Shandac, where Trance and his family lived.

Trance had been beyond delighted when he had invited the Markems to his and Gracer’s graduation just a few months ago. Fondly he remembered them coming to his home and having breakfast with his family and then going with them to the graduation. His family had then hosted a graduation party for Trance and Gracer. Many of their friends stopped by during the party and celebrated with them before heading off to their own parties. Zam and Mandor, Trance’s other two friends from the knight class, stopped in and the four boys laughed and joked for two hours straight. Eventually the party came to an end for Trance and his friends. Life resumed at a slower pace.

Trance arrived at the last house and looked the yard over as he walked up to the door. He noticed that there were four large trees in the front yard. Before he got to the door something tickled his senses and he turned and glanced around and saw the house across the street had a hedge fence around the front yard. This was such a nice peaceful summer so far that had felt very safe and secure. Today had been so pleasant that he went about mowing and trimming lawns lost in his thoughts that this sensation caught him off guard.

Strange, he thought, as the hair on the back of his neck suddenly stood on end. His eyes narrowed as he carefully looked around. He didn’t see anything or anyone that stood out that could be considered a threat. This was odd. Why should he feel something wrong? After all, he had taken care of this yard all summer and had never felt threatened before. The Verats were a very nice family and really appreciated his hard work. Mr. Verat had been in a chariot accident two years ago and was partially disabled. He could not physically take care of the yard like he used to.

This just did not make sense. He looked around a second time and still did not see anything that was out of place. Ah well, he turned back to the door and politely knocked. Ten minutes later he was busy and concentrating as he weaved the mower around the trees. Thunk! He spun and saw an arrow stuck in the tree right where he had just been. Swiftly he stopped and spun around, searching the area and looking for the archer.

Nobody was in sight. “Hey!” Trance yelled. Maybe someone was target shooting and let an arrow get away. This is really strange. No one stepped out; nobody came out and said, “Hey I’m sorry. Are you all right?” What was going on?

Trance decided then to have a closer look at the arrow. This was curious. The arrow was just an ordinary target arrow, nothing special. What was strange was that it was stuck in the tree deeper than it should have been. He looked around again and still saw nobody. Before he continued, he went up to the door and talked to Mr. Verat about the arrow. “I’ll call the Sheriff,” Mr. Verat said, stunned that this should happen at his property.

Trance waited until the Sheriff’s officer arrived and took Trance’s statement and studied the arrow. He removed it and took it for evidence before doing a thorough search of the nearby area. Trance then finished mowing and trimming the yard. As he left to head back home, he glanced back behind him. Once again, he sensed someone behind him, watching him just out of sight. Was the person there behind a tree or the hedge fence? He just wasn’t sure and headed straight home with no more incidents. Maybe just a strange accident, he thought.

Somewhere behind him a figure dressed all in dark green stood with a high-powered compound bow. The figure stood out of sight and watched Trance walk away. Shame about the miss, maybe there will be another time.

Chapter 2

Unseen Pursuit

Summer was coming to a close. Trance had three weeks left in his summer break before going off to train to be a Golden Griffin hopefully or a knight. His lawn mowing jobs were finished for the season and there had not been any more arrows. The first couple days after the arrow, Trance was very mindful of his surroundings. He had always been watchful and careful wherever he went, but since the incident with the arrow he made double sure of his surroundings.

The sheriff’s had investigated and could not solve where the arrow had come from. They did not find anyone that was out with a bow and arrow at the time that the arrow had just missed hitting Trance. What bothered them and Trance most was the depth of the arrow in the tree. The arrow had to have been fired from a rather high-powered bow or crossbow. Trance’s parents were also nervous about him continuing to mow lawns the rest of the summer. Eileen in particular questioned him every time he got back from mowing lawns if anything more had happened when he was out. He knew that she loved him very much and was just looking out for him. So every time she asked he would respond pleasantly.

“No mom, nothing happened today. Everything was fine. I got everyone’s lawn done, and Mrs. Coulant paid me five more currents this week,” he had actually told her last week referring to the Althorian currency; a current is the equivalent of a dollar.

At the present Trance sat in the living room, a small travelling bag packed with clothes. His family had been invited to the Markem’s for a family get together. Trance had been looking forward to this trip for a couple weeks and could not wait to not only see Chorus and his family, but also his friend Gracer Karry would be there. Gracer’s mom was Chorus’s sister. Unfortunately, Trance’s other two school friends Zam and Mandor were on vacation with their families and he would not see them until they arrived for Preliminary Training. Trance heard from both of them shortly after being invited to the Markems. Zam and his family were heading to the East Coast to visit relatives and see the Great Etherian Ocean, while Mandor and his family were going camping in the northern state of Yowland.

In school Trance learned that the Kingdom of Cator had forty-four mainland states and seven island states, two in the Etherian Ocean, and the other five scattered out in the western Ulunder Ocean. The state where he resided in was Valyar. Today Trance and his family were headed east two hundred miles to Kelm, the town near the Markem’s, in the state of Wylian. With memories of his flight from the Markem’s farm when it was attacked last summer floating through his head, he looked forward to traveling with his family this time.

All too soon his thoughts were interrupted as the rest of his family started to wake and started to get ready to go. While his mother set out a quick breakfast, Trance took his luggage out to the carriage. After loading his bag in the trunk, he checked on Odin and made sure his horse was ready to travel. He reached down and patted his pocket and felt his riding license that he had just received. As he checked Odin’s systems he paid attention to the difference between Odin and the two horses that pulled the Victorine and Lauraith, Kyle’s warhorse.

The two carriage horses stood nineteen hands tall and were four inches broader across than Odin. They were more roughly shaped than Odin and were equipped with regular rectangular chips and a processor programmed with all of the maps to every city of Cator. The processor was upgradeable for the cities all around Althora. Also in their programming were all of the traffic laws, and they were synchronized as a team to pull together. Lauraith on the other hand was a large full warhorse at sixteen hands tall with a refined and rounded head and body of polished armor plate. Lauraith was also equipped with an oct chip matrix processor. Like all modern robot warhorses, Lauraith was programmed with all of the latest battle plans and current stratagems, traffic laws, maps, self-defense targeting, kingdom positioning system, communications, and the current standard on board crossbow weapons system. When activated two micro crossbows extend out from near the base of the horse's neck, one on each side, and fired bolts loaded from a chain belt system.

Odin was unique in age and appearance, but also in his functionality, from the improvements made by Trance. Odin had a brushed metal look to his armor and stood fifteen hands tall and looked slightly more angular in appearance. Trance had equipped the horse with a rare hex chip honeycomb processor, the precursor to the oct matrix, only a billionth of a second slower in processor speed. With Kyle’s help Trance had downloaded all of the current programs for Odin’s main computer core. Also, unknowing, Trance had upgraded Odin’s leg motors with those of a robot racehorse for greater speed. This was aided by the fact that Odin had lighter and stronger armor than Lauraith. This advantage in armor was also helpful in another unique feature that Odin had and Lauraith did not.

As Trance patted his horse he glanced at the corner of the garage at Odin’s flight pack. In his research to update and upgrade Odin he had discovered this option for the Muster Type 18 B. It took him four days searching in the robot scrap yard to find the flight pack. He spent seven weeks cleaning, repairing, and upgrading it. With all the flight surfaces clean and polished he then worked on the two hyper powered engines, a combination fan and ramjet that sat at the ends of the 7-foot wings. When not in use the wings folded straight up on its armored frame designed to fit perfectly over the horse’s saddle and had a sleeve that covered the rider’s legs at the stirrups. It was a two-person job to lift the pack up and place it in position on the horse. The rider just needed to mount like normal and place their legs in the sleeves, then open a small panel just forward of the saddle as well as a corresponding panel of the flight pack and pulling out and connecting four multi filament fiber optic cables from the pack into the horse. Once the connectors are attached the rider simply closes both panels and activates the horse and engages the flight system by selecting the new icon on the control and targeting screen. The horse’s control sticks also controlled the flight system.

Trance had been elated the first time he had taken Odin for a flight around the neighborhood. He stood in the garage just lost in pleasant memory of that day. Suddenly a footstep interrupted his thoughts and he spun around to see his older adoptive brother calmly standing in the doorway. “Good morning. Are you ready to go,” said Kyle.

“Yeah, I’m ready. I am so glad that you were able to get a week off to go with us,” Trance answered.

Kyle stepped into the garage with his duffel and approached the carriage. In a couple moments he stashed his bag next to Trances. Then he went over and patted Lauraith. He turned to his younger brother and smiled. He knew his brother was very fond of Odin, and in fact he had helped Trance work on Odin as often as he could. His folks had given him Lauraith a week before their unfortunate deaths at the hands of the Boulthorians. Three uncles and his grandfather had gone in on investing in Lauraith for him. “Well, are you ready to take Odin for the long ride.”

“I’m ready,” Trance said. “Are you ready,” he said to his horse.

Odin turned his head and looked at Trance and Kyle and in his crisp anxious mechanical voice, “I’m ready master. Kyle it is good to see you. I hope you and Lauraith are in prime condition. This will be a good day for a ride.” This was one of Trance’s last additions to Odin. While scavenging the scrap yard he had stumbled upon a very old robot knight and had removed the robot’s voice box and installed it in Odin.

Kyle’s smile broadened. He stepped up to Lauraith and patted the horse and looked at Odin and said, “It’s good to see you again too Odin, and yes it is a good day for a ride.” He patted Lauraith again and said, “You’re ready to go aren’t you boy,” and he leaned up so he could see the comm. screen. “Yes I am quite ready. I am fully charged and ready to go,” Kyle read.

Trance smiled at his brother and took in his appearance. He noticed that Kyle stood cool and confident. His light brown hair casually swept back and his grey blue eyes had a calming effect on him. Kyle had tan light canvas pants and a light blue short sleeve shirt and there around his waist was his sword belt with only his dagger in its sheath.

Trance looked down at himself and then back at Kyle with a question on his face, should he wear his dagger or not. Kyle saw the unspoken question and with a quick nod of yes and a side wise smile before he turned back to Lauraith to prepare him to leave in just a few minutes. Trance understood and was about to head back for his dagger when Kyle spoke, “You might grab your bow and arrows while you’re at it.”

Trance smiled and nodded and headed back into the house. As he climbed the stairs he heard his mother directing both Sammy and Heather to get their stuff together. Trance found Sammy in their room with a pile of clothes on the floor. He went straight to where his dagger was laying and in a moment had it on his belt and then he opened the closet and retrieved his bow and quiver of arrows. As he was about to leave the room Sammy looked up and took in the fact that Trance had his dagger and bow.

“Wow,” Sammy said as his eyes widened, “Are you really allowed to wear that?”

Trance stopped in the doorway and turned back. “Kyle said that I should.” Then before he left he asked, “Do you need help Sammy.”

“Na, I just gotta figure out what to take. Do you think I should take my pocket knife?”

Trance shrugged and replied, “I don’t have a problem with that. You might not want mom to know though.” He turned left the room and almost ran into his sister as she was standing in the doorway to her room. She looked at him with a raised eyebrow. In her hand was her packed bag. She looked him up and down and then looked past him at Sammy.

“Come on Sammy, you need to get packed,” Heather said and then looked back at her older brother with a small smile and went down the hall to the living room.

Ten minutes later the whole family sat at the table and had a breakfast of what resembled oatmeal. After breakfast was eaten and the dishes were cleaned and put away the family went out to the garage. Kyle and Trance both mounted their horses and trotted them out to the street as their dad locked the house up and then headed to the carriage. Sammy looked enviously at Trance and Kyle on their horses before reluctantly climbing in the back seat of the carriage next to Heather. Their mom got in the front at the controls and activated the horses and drove out of the garage and waited for their dad. Evan climbed in the carriage and as Eileen drove the carriage down the street closely followed by Kyle and Trance on their horses he reached up and clicked the garage door opener. Before they traveled a block the garage door closed.

Eileen had the directions to the Markem’s farm programmed in the carriage's map screen and she drove confidently as her husband leaned back and closed his eyes. Evan worked at the Royal Althorian Observatory and had finished his shift at four in the morning. Time on Althora was slightly different than back on Earth. There are twenty-eight hours in a day so midnight is at 14:00 EM, Early Morning, and noon is 14:00 AN, Afternoon. Every hour had eighty minutes with each minute with eighty seconds. The family had planned the trip carefully and should only take a little over three hours. After two hours they planned to stop and take a break, get a bite to eat and walk around a little before pushing on.

Trance smoothly guided Odin with the control sticks, commonly still referred to as reigns. They extended up from near the base of the neck in front of the saddle and below the target com screen. One of his first improvements to Odin was upgrading the controls to a pair of ergonomic control handles. Fortunately Odin’s saddle was already ergonomic and Trance just reupholstered it with new black leather. As he rode along following the carriage Trance looked over at Kyle and how relaxed he was riding Lauraith.

“How are you doing Trance,” Kyle called over.

“I’m fine, how about you,” Trance replied.

They rode in silence for a few minutes until suddenly their mothers voice came over the communication systems of both horses. “Hey guys, how are you doing back there?”

“We’re great mom,” Kyle replied as he looked over at Trance and grinned.

“Okay, let me know if you guys need anything or need to stop,” Eileen said.

Typical, thought Trance. His mom always wanted them to be comfortable. That’s okay; she was just being a mom. Chances were that his dad was asleep as they spoke. Trance rode up slightly closer to the carriage and was able to look in the back window and saw that indeed his dad was asleep, Sammy had a small gaming system and was engrossed in what he was playing, and Heather had earphones on and was probably listening to some music.

Trance looked ahead and followed the carriage and with a glance knew that Kyle was riding beside him. Inwardly Trance thought back to almost a year ago when he had ridden Odin for the first time as he rode with Corena and her escort of Golden Griffins. He smiled to himself remembering riding with them into town and heading toward his family’s home. Now he was riding the other way with his family. Wow what a difference a year makes.

As if knowing what was going on in Trance’s mind Kyle looked over and asked Trance about his trip home last summer. “So, do you remember coming home last year? What was it like?”

For the next hour and a half Trance and Kyle talked about his journey. Kyle was impressed with how Trance had evaded the Boulthorian knights and his ingenious shelter that he had built and used until he approached Cassera. It was in this town that Trance met Corena and the Golden Griffins at a small restaurant. Kyle enjoyed hearing Trance tell his adventure and he had heard more from his friend Zak Karry. Suddenly as Kyle paused in their conversation, he sat up and started to think.

There had been something about Trance’s story that had triggered a memory and he started to remember. It had been near the end of spring in the month Castereen, his last month of school. Kyle and his family had become very good friends with the Sonderson’s. And then an unfortunate event took place that changed his life. Kyle and his parents went to see the princess leave for her vacation trip. Corena was riding with an escort of Golden Griffins. He easily remembered passing her in the halls as they attended the same school.

Kyle and his family had a good spot to sit and watch and wave as Corena and her escort left the city when the most awful event took place. From out of nowhere three divisions of Boulthorian knights rode out and swarmed the area. There was panic and confusion as they swept through and slew everyone in their path as they rode straight for the princess. Kyle remembered the nightmare too vividly, only never truly putting together what had happened. In horrific detail he saw the knights bearing down on him and his family.

The Boulthorian knights came rushing in from behind his family and shoved them aside. Kyle vividly remembered hitting the ground and rolling over in horrific timing to see one enemy swordsman ride up and make a wild back swing that caught his mother in the throat and an instant later a Boulthorian’s wicked winged spear was planted into his father. In a moment he was an orphan. At that moment he was too devastated and shocked to say, do, or think anything. His life at that moment would have truly spiraled down if it had not been for the Sondersons.

There was not any way he could ever repay Evan and Eileen for being his parent’s friends and adopting him. It did not escape him that this was an unusual situation, especially since he was eighteen years old and almost ready to graduate from school and join the military. He’d been an only child and now he had a family with siblings. Best of all was his friendship with Trance; true he was a year older, yet the two of them had very similar interests and passions. Now without realizing it, Trance had just said something that clicked in Kyle’s mind. However, before he could voice or think more about this frightening thought Eileen called them to a stop.

“Hey guys, there is a rest stop just ahead. Let’s stop and take a small break and stretch, then we can head on to Cassera and we can get something to eat at the restaurant that Trance told us about,” she said.

Suddenly Trance called out and pointed, “Hey everyone, look over there.” Kyle spun his head and looked where Trance was pointing off to the right and gasped. Trance and Kyle pulled their horses to a stop and just ahead of them Eileen pulled the carriage over to the side of the road and everyone looked. They had been starting into the foothills toward the mountain range between them and the Markem’s farm. The small herd of velops, animals that resembled large antelopes with cow horns were grazing peacefully and barely looked up at the people that had stopped to look at them.

Trance took a look back and was slightly surprised to see that they were not the only people that stopped to look at the animals. He noticed that several people had vidcams and were snapping pictures. Some things just don’t change, he thought. Soon they were back on the road to the rest area. After a brief stop they were on the road again and heading uphill. Trance felt excitement as he started noticing the scenery and remembering being here a year ago.

They started up again and continued their journey. Trance’s nerves were tingling as he rode Odin closer to Cassera. He had to concentrate and restrain himself from racing Odin up the hill. Mile after mile slipped by as he rode on and felt happier and more excited. Somehow seeing the herd of velops had side tracked Trance and Kyle’s conversation. Now they were both focused on riding up and over the hill.

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Time seemed to crawl as the Sonderson’s rode up another hill and down the other side. As Trance rode around a curve in the road, another horse and rider topped the hill behind him. The rider had kept an even pace for miles keeping his target in sight and far enough back not to be seen. There was time and he was not in a hurry. This adventure will be over in two days. He smiled relaxed as he rode downhill.

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The town appeared just ahead and bustled with people. Trance rode forward and was immediately struck by what he saw. A year ago he had approached Cassera after several days in the woods after leaving the Markem’s farm and escaping the raiding Boulthorian knights. At the time he had only been thinking of finding someplace to eat and then trying to find his family. Now riding into town he was able to appreciate the town. As he looked at the town’s layout he saw that it was like some of the mountain towns that he knew from back on Earth. The town that he thought of in particular was Breckenridge Colorado.

Situated in a valley with one main road through town with a mix of restaurants, shops, and three banks and four parallel arteries on both sides of the main street and many streets and avenues Cassera was home to just under five thousand residents. Trance was fascinated by the arrangement and eagerly looked for the restaurant where he had met Corena. His habit kicked in as he looked around taking everything in. Last year he had been so excited about heading to find his family and meeting the Golden Griffins and Corena that he didn’t take time to look around. Now everything was fresh and he wasn’t sure what road he had even come in on.

The carriage turned a corner and went straight two more blocks and suddenly he spotted a building on a corner that looked familiar. He looked closer and with a jolt of excitement he remembered passing the building last year. As he approached the corner his eyes swung down the side street and he looked back to Kyle. “I walked into town on that street.”

Kyle nodded and smiled back. That meant that they were close to the restaurant. A couple more minutes and Kyle could not stop laughing as Trance nearly leaped out of Odin’s saddle as they came into view of their lunch destination. He guided Lauraith to a hitching post and watched Trance do the same thing. As he dismounted he noticed Eileen park the Victorine and a moment later the doors opened and the family climbed out.

Everyone stretched and headed toward the restaurant doors and entered. Trance was in awe as he had time to relax and look around the room. Vividly he remembered entering here a year ago and seeing the Golden Griffins. His face had flushed as he heard Corena’s voice for the first time and was introduced to her. He followed his family as they lined up and approached the counter to place their orders.

Sandwiches, salads, and drinks were delivered and the Sonderson’s took a moment to bow their heads in thanks for the beautiful day and their food. As he took another bite of his salad Trance looked out the window at the traffic of robot animals and carts, carriages, and wagons. He took another bite and chuckled at a joke that Kyle was telling. Outside another horse and rider passed the restaurant windows. The rider was unremarkable and Trance only saw the back of him for a fraction of a second. Something tickled his senses for only a moment and then passed as the rider disappeared with the rest of the traffic.

Chapter 3

Second Arrow

Kelm was spread out in front of them. Trance was excited as he rode next to Kyle now in front of the Victorine still driven by his mother. His excitement grew as suddenly a man’s voice called out to him. He turned and waved at a man that Trance recognized as the farmer that lived across the road from the Markems. Trance waved as he rode by and soon he saw one of Martin’s school friends. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Kyle smirk at him and sit up straight in the saddle.

Trance smiled so much he felt his jaw was getting sore. He saw more people he recognized and waved almost feeling like he was in a parade as he called out greetings. From here he knew the way and had to concentrate to keep Odin’s speed at the legal limit.

“Hey Trance, slow down. We’ll be there soon enough,” Kyle shouted at him as Trance started to pull away. Kyle sped up in an effort to keep pace with Trance as they turned a corner and headed down a country road that obviously Trance knew. He almost had Lauraith at a full gallop and soon fields started to flash past and he could just make out the woods in the distance.

Fortunately there were no sheriffs in the area as Trance sped down the road. He could feel it in his soul that he would be at the Markems in just a few minutes. Just around the next curve he saw ahead of him the Markem’s house. Curious, he thought as he registered a slim column of smoke rising from near the house. Just at the edge of his thoughts he registered Kyle riding up to him and further back the sound of the Victorine bringing up the rear. Off to his right he spotted Chorus on his plow horse and he slowed and waved like mad. Chorus waved back and turned around to head back to the house. Moments later Trance slowed up and rode into the Markems drive. He dismounted just as Kyle pulled up next to him and a few seconds later the Victorine pulled in and Chorus arrived as well.

Before Trance had a chance to greet Chorus the door flew open and Maxine, Chorus’s wife, rushed out and wrapped her arms around him. He stood there feeling a rush of emotions as she embraced him and then turned to greet Kyle and his family as they exited the carriage. A moment later they were joined by Martin and his twin sister Martina and their little sister Margaretta came out of the house and greeted everyone. With all of the initial greetings out of the way Martin, Kyle, and Trance took the horses to the barn and found a place to hitch them and park the carriage.

“Wait till you see what mom has fixed for dinner for us tonight,” said Martin as the three boys headed back.

At that moment Maxine called, “Martin I need you to help get their things and bring them in the house. I got to go check our dinner.”

Trance and Kyle went back with Martin to get the luggage and take it into the house and the guestrooms. To his surprise Maxine passed the boys and went to the far side of the barn. “Where is she going?” Trance asked Martin.

“You’ll see pretty soon,” Martin replied.

Kyle watched her go and then looked up and took a deep breath. He closed his eyes and smiled to himself. Dutifully he went and helped Trance and Martin. The boys talked and joked as they worked and before they realized it they had everything in.

“Well how are you doing,” Chorus asked Trance as everyone gathered in the living room.

“I’m doing fine. Just about ready to join the Golden Griffins,” Trance replied proudly. He then looked around and asked, “Where is Gracer and his family”

“They’ll be here in the morning. Thara called an hour ago and told us that one of their carriage horses broke down and they’re getting it fixed,” Maxine said as she came into the house and headed for her chair in the living room. What a great week, Trance and his family are here, and her sister in-law and family will be here tomorrow. As she sat Trance caught a whiff of something that he could not place. It smelled like roasting meat, but he had not passed anything in the kitchen that looked like a roast going.

“Well how are you all doing,” Maxine asked the Sonderson’s. She sat comfortably as she turned her eyes on everyone in turn.

Soon the room was filled with conversation. Trance was a bit more nervous talking to Maxine about his ambition to be a Golden Griffin, the elite knights of the Althorian military. She had been a mother to him last summer. He noticed her concern and she looked at his own mother. His eyes swung between the two women and saw the same look. Turning back he continued, “I have Odin ready for his inspection. He should easily pass since I looked everything over three times to make sure he met all of the new regulations.”

Across the room Martina and Margaretta were talking to Heather, laughing and giggling. It was nice to see his sister making more friends. He could not help overhearing a portion of what was said.

“I’ve applied to Kindoran University,” Martina was saying, “They have an incredible Veterinarian program.”

“That sounds interesting,” Heather replied. “I’m not sure what I want to do yet. There isn’t anything I really enjoy.”

“Well I want to be a doctor,” Margaretta said, “The animals are cute, but I want to be like ‘Doctor Renain.’ She is the coolest.” She said referring to the female lead character of a detective drama that is a forensic pathologist.

“You know that she works with dead people, not people that need a doctor’s care,” Martina said. It was obvious to Trance that they had had that conversation before.

“I know,” Margaretta said almost defiantly, “She’s still cool, it would be neat to do that and help the sheriff’s solve crimes. I’ve been reading the books also and taking notes on what I need to learn.”

Trance remembered vividly one day last year a week before the Boulthorian invasion when he and the family had gone to town and her excitement at the new “Doctor Renain” novel. He had acquired almost the entire series himself. He turned back to Martin and Kyle who were discussing the upcoming Valian season. Trance had been so involved in his classes and competing in the knight class that he had not watched much of the rough contact sport that had elements of American football, soccer, and rugby.

“You know that the Valyar Royal Lynx got the best draft picks. If they play like they did last year they stand a real shot at winning the Chalice this year,” Kyle said.

“I don’t know, the Wylian Golden Foxes did pretty well and they made it to the semi-final round. If it had not been for that late kick by the Garrian Otters we would have made the finals,” Martin replied, his disappointment obvious.

“Yeah, and then the Otters had a real battle with the Tyloon Tors to win the Chalice,” Kyle said.

“I remember. Their kicker had to make that last five point kick for them to win,” Martin added.

“How does the scoring work again,” Trance asked.

“Well, you know that the pitch field is one hundred and thirty yards long in an oval, with one hundred and twenty yards in the playing field and a five yard deep goal zone. The team on offence has five downs to get twenty yards either by running the ball or throwing it to each other while the defense tries to stop them or take the ball back. Now if the team on offense gets within thirty five yards of the goal line they can either go for a goal across the line for ten points or try to kick for a goal in one of four stacked netted goals. The bottom goal is one point, then two points, three points and five points. They can always try to kick a goal from anywhere on the field really; however, most teams want to try to get the ten points if possible first. Any time the team on offence does not make the twenty yards in five downs, or they fail to score when they get past the thirty five yard line, the ball changes hands to the other team,” Kyle explained.

“Thanks,” Trance said.

Just then Maxine looked at the clock and said, “I think it’s time for dinner.” She got up and started in the kitchen.

“Would you like some help,” Eileen asked as she stood up and followed Maxine.

“That would be really nice,” Maxine said as she stopped in the kitchen and opened a cupboard and took out a large platter and then selected a large slicing knife. She waited for Eileen and the two women headed out the door.

Curiosity finally got the better of Trance. He stood up and headed after his mom and Maxine. Maxine led the way to the far side of the barn and turned the corner. Trance looked and saw the slim column of smoke still rising from that side of the barn. The sight that met his eyes as he turned the corner was simply mouth-watering. Over a fair sized roasting fire of wood and charcoal was a boar on a mechanized spit.

Maxine handed the platter and knife to Eileen and then walked up to the mechanical spit. She hit a button and stepped back as the frame system lifted the roasted boar and moved it out from above the fire and where they could approach it. Maxine took the knife and picked up a nearby meat fork and carved out several slices of meat and laid them on the platter held by Eileen. When she had a large pile of meat on the platter Maxine led the way back to the house.

Since the tray was rather heavy, Trance took the platter from his mother and carried it back. Minutes later with the platter in the center of the table Trance sat with his family and the Markems to a feast. Not only did they have the roasted boar, everyone had a salad and a variety of vegetables. As everyone ate, the platter was taken and filled several times. When everyone had eaten his or her fill Maxine retrieved the dessert that she had made.

“I hope everyone likes this, I made it this morning and put it in the freezer,” Maxine said as she retrieved two silvery cylinder containers from the upright freezer that stood next to the refrigerator. “I wasn’t sure what you all liked so I made two batches of fream, one vanillan, and the other is coco.”

The Sonderson’s all made enthusiastic remarks, “Awesome.” “Wonderful.” “That sounds great.” Trance found his mouth watering at the thought of homemade ice cream, known on Althora as fream, frozen cream. Maxine set the cylinders on the table and took out a scoop from one of the kitchen drawers. She then opened a cupboard and brought out her fream dishes. Promptly she dished out scoops in the clear swirled bowels.

After dinner Trance joined everyone in the living room as they sat and visited long into the night. Finally everyone was so exhausted from the day’s travel and preparations that they all went to their beds for a good night’s rest.

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Excitement pulsed through Trance as he lay on his bed. He tried to lay still and relax a few more minutes, but knew that it was useless. His eyes snapped open and he sat up in bed and looked around. Instinct told him that it was just before dawn. He looked around and spotted Sammy laying on his camp bed curled in his blankets and deep in slumber. Trance smiled at his little brother. A quick look to his right and he was slightly surprised that Kyle’s bed was empty. Curious, I wonder where Kyle is, thought Trance as he stood up.

Since he was wide-awake now, he went to the restroom and took care of business. After washing up he went and got dressed and went upstairs to greet the day. The stairs to the Markem’s basement were in the kitchen so as Trance came through the upstairs doorway a surprising sight greeted him. Chorus, Maxine, Martin, and Kyle were sitting at the table talking pleasantly. All eyes swung in his direction and he was warmly greeted and invited to join them.

“Would you like something to eat or drink,” Maxine asked as Trance sat down and yawned.

“I’ll take something to drink, but I’ll wait to eat when everyone is up,” Trance replied.

“What would you like to drink,” Maxine said as she stood up and headed for the cupboard.

“Maybe just some water right now.”

“All right,” she said as she opened a cupboard and retrieved a glass. In a moment she handed him his water and sat back down.

“The fields are almost ready for harvest,” Chorus was saying. He looked at his watch and sighed, “I should get out. I need to get some water going before Thara’s family gets here.” He stood up and headed out the door.

Martin stood and was going to join his dad when Chorus signaled him to sit and enjoy visiting. He sat again and turned back to his friends and continued to discuss his last year at school and continued the conversation of the night before on the upcoming Valian season. Then remembering something Trance had said the night before he said, “Hey, how about after breakfast why don’t you bring your bow and arrows and I’ll grab the hunting spears and you can practice your archery and spear throwing.”

“That’s a great idea,” Kyle said. “I assume that you have a target range. That would be fun if all of us could take turns. What do you think Trance.”

“That’s okay with me,” Trance said as he perked up. “I could use more practice to be ready for the qualifications.”

“Can I go too?” asked Sammy from the top of the stairs.

Trance looked at the other two and said, “Sure, you could practice with us.” Then he looked at Maxine and asked, “What are you planning for breakfast? Is there anything I can help you with?”

“I’ll help,” said Eileen as she came up the stairs, “So you boys can go out and practice till breakfast and then go back out. Sammy, did you make your bed when you got up.”

“No,” he said and he got up and went back down to make his bed.

Maxine greeted Eileen and stood up. “Well I guess we can get started on breakfast. I have a whole slab of sliced Sager, and plenty of eggs for starters and flatcakes are easy to whip up.” She went to her fridge and took out the large package of sliced Sager, an animal the cross between a cow and a boar and the meat looked like bacon.

In minutes the two moms had breakfast started and the house was filled with sweet and savory smells. As they worked together in the kitchen, Trance went and retrieved his bow and arrows while Martin got the hunting spears. Trance was about to follow Martin out the door when Kyle stopped him.

“You need one more thing,” Kyle said.

“What’s that,” Trance asked.

“Your dagger. I know that you are going to be a great Golden Griffin and I think you should get used to wearing the dagger at all times. By rule, I’m here as a knight to watch over and supervise you.”

Trance nodded his acknowledgment and went back for his eagle head dagger. When he came back he noticed the looks he got from both women. A combination of love and worry as both of them knew the dangers he would face as one of the elite knights of Althora.

Outside Martin led the way past where the boar had been roasted yesterday. In no time at all he had an old target set up and Trance took his place and shot a quiver full of arrows into it. Martin was an excellent hunter and archer and gave his best critique of his form. Martin took his own bow and demonstrated his technique to shoot. Kyle was just a regular knight and specialized in two weapons, his leaf pummeled sword and his baseball bat styled mace. However, in his training as a knight he had to learn every weapon including archery.

Kyle took Trance’s bow and shot next. While they collected the arrows again Sammy came running up to them. “Is it my turn,” he called out as he approached them. Just then two events collided at once.

Kyle was about to hand Sammy the bow when the sound of a carriage being driven down the road getting closer drew their attention. They were quite a ways from the road and the large ditch that bordered the Markem’s farm was full and flowing not fifteen yards away with the forest just beyond the ditch.

Trance suddenly stood straight and swung his head around toward the forest. His sense had kicked in at a sound, nothing definite, just a leaf crackle. Just then a dark green carriage with the top down rolled in the Markem’s drive and Trance heard another sound that froze his blood. With a swift glance he knew that Sammy was right in front of him and in line with the forest. Trance dove and tackled Sammy, shielding him as an arrow shot straight through the air and flew directly where the two had just been standing. Martin and Kyle were stunned to see Trance leap on Sammy and took a moment to wonder what was going on and were suddenly alert as the arrow struck the ground.

“Martin, run and have your mom call the sheriff,” Kyle ordered as he instantly drew his dagger and ran and leaped over the ditch and ran into the forest.

For a fraction of a moment Martin looked confused and then he sprinted away. He had heard about the arrow incident, but like everyone else, he thought it was just a random incident. Now this was serious.

Trance anxiously looked around and carefully stood up and lifted Sammy to his feet. “Sammy, run, get in the house and stay there,” he said as he drew his own dagger. At Sammy’s questioning look he added, “I’ll be okay, just go and tell mom and dad what just happened.” With that said Trance sent Sammy to safety and he turned and made a running jump and landed mostly in the water on the far side of the ditch.

Just great he thought as he dragged himself up and out of the ditch. He had seen the direction that Kyle had taken entering the forest and he set off to follow. Once in the forest edge he slowed and stalked carefully. All of his senses keened into the forest as he kept his head on a swivel and he moved carefully forward. One arrow coming at him was bad enough. A second one now was serious. Yet it could be just a random hunter. No, that arrow had been meant for him. Visions of Knight Class came to his mind and the number of times archers from opposing teams had shot at him with rubber tipped arrows.

Sammy could have been hit too. That thought made him ever more anxious and angry. Yes, that emotion that he usually kept in check; however, that was too close and personal. If you want to shoot at me, that’s fine. You want to shoot and possibly hit my brother. Pray I never find you, he thought as he slipped into hunting mode.

He clutched his dagger and moved forward in a more focused approach. As he stepped up to another tree he noticed something on the ground. It wasn’t much, just a couple leaves that were flipped over. Why they caught his attention he had no idea. He stopped and stooped down. All of the leaves in the area were laying in a complete random pattern and yet a natural pattern. Yet these couple leaves were disturbed. Curious, he thought as he looked around. He stood up and looked around and was suddenly startled.

No way, he thought as suddenly he found himself looking back at the very spot that he and Sammy had just been standing. He cocked his head to the side and raised his arms as if he had a bow and arrow. With slow deliberation he made the motions of shooting the bow. He looked down and smiled. This has to be the place.

The crunch of dirt shattered the silence and he swung his head and instantly raised his dagger. Another crunch of dirt and he readied his arm and focused his hearing and sight in that direction. Crunch, whatever or whoever is almost here. Crunch and a shadow moved into sight.

“Hey wait,” said Kyle as he stepped into the open and was almost set on by Trance.

“Oh thank God it was you,” Trance said as he pulled his arm and dagger back then lowered and sheathed the weapon. “Woo. I think this is where the archer stood,” he added showing Kyle the leaves that led him to stand and look around and then toward where they had been standing when the arrow flew past.

Kyle knelt down and looked and stood and saw where Trance indicated and nodded his head in agreement. “I think you’re right bro. I found a set of horse tracks up that way about a hundred yards away. I had a hard time following a set of steps this way. Whoever it was knew how to walk in the woods and hide their prints. I almost got lost coming back several times before finding the right track again.” Kyle shook his head slightly trying to figure this out. After a moment he said, “Let’s head back and call the sheriff and report this.”

The two boys stood together and looked around and then headed straight toward the large ditch that bordered the Markem’s farm. They walked in silence until they almost got to the ditch. “This makes no sense. Why would someone shoot at me?” Trance asked.

They turned and headed to the simple bridge and Kyle shrugged. “I don’t know. Can you think of anyone that would try to harm you?”

Trance stopped in his tracks. The thought struck him like lightning. Rex, his most vicious rival and Corena’s ex-boyfriend would want him hurt. Rex had tried numerous ways last year to hurt him, even going so far at the end of year tournaments to say that Trance was un-chivalrous. Trance proved his case in that instance and let Rex prove his character. And then most striking was during the Swordsman Joust at the same tournaments. Vividly he saw himself riding his horse Odin and racing toward Rex and the massive collision as they met. Surprisingly Trance remained in the saddle and Rex had been unhorsed. If it had just been that Rex had really wanted to beat him at all costs would be one thing; however, the fact that the referees were suspicious and confiscated Rex’s wooden sword and discovered a layer of steel sandwiched between two layers of wood. Rex was outraged that he had been found out and almost kicked out of the tournaments.

Then again Rex wasn’t an archer. Rex was mainly a swordsman and also carried a mace and spear. Trance was not sure what Rex would choose for his fourth weapon as a Golden Griffin with the new rule change. According to the rule a Golden Griffin had to qualify with one more weapon than last year. Somehow Trance highly doubted that Rex would pick up archery, and the skill that had been used to shoot at him and then take off wasn’t Rex’s style. Rex would either come after him in person to make him look bad, or… Trance felt Kyle watching him as they stood just feet away from the bridge. He turned to his older brother and quietly said, “Maybe he got someone to come after me.”

“What, who,” Kyle said.

“Rex. What if he got someone to try to shoot me? I don’t know why really, other than the fact that he still hates me for obvious reasons. But would he really want me dead? And who would he get to track me down.”

“I don’t know. That’s pretty serious for just a school rivalry,” Kyle commented. All too well he knew about the antagonistic relationship between the two young men. Rex had certainly gone out of his way to hurt Trance last year. Kyle had even had vicious encounters with him when he was in school. Would Rex’s schoolyard jealousy be violent enough to lead to this?

After a moment both Trance and Kyle turned and crossed the simple bridge and walked toward the farmhouse. As they approached Chorus, Martin, and Evan Sonderson were coming toward them. Chorus with a scythe, Martin with an ax, and Evan held a pitchfork in his hand and all three looked very concerned. “What did you find?” asked Chorus, as they got closer.

“Not much. I followed some tracks for a ways and Trance found the spot where the shooter stood,” Kyle answered.

Trance was about to add to what Kyle said when he spotted more people approaching. Among them were Maxine and her girls with Eileen, Trance’s mother, with Sammy and Heather and to his appreciation, Gracer and his parents. As they got closer Trance could see the concern in his friend's blue grey eyes. In fact as he looked around he saw the same concern all around. Before he could greet his friend and let everyone know that he was fine he was startled to hear the sound of mechanized hooves galloping down the road.

Unlike a real horse that has a metal horseshoe to protect its hooves as it runs around, the hooves of the robot horses have a rubberized horseshoe. After living on Althora for a year, Trance had not only gotten used to hearing the robot horses traveling down the road, he also picked up the subtle difference between the horses used for regular public transportation and the sound made by military horses. The horses that he heard galloping down the road were certainly the military variety. He tensed as he turned his attention to the sound as it got closer and closer. Then they rode around the corner, and he almost jerked his dagger out of its sheath before he relaxed.

Everyone turned around at the sound of the robot horses and relief appeared on all faces as the Sheriff and three deputies pulled up and dismounted. Chorus immediately rushed forward and extended his hand to the Sheriff. “Sheriff Geridan, thank you for coming so soon.”

Geridan took Chorus’s hand and shook it cordially. “We came right away. What happened exactly,” he said as he took out an all-purpose computer pad and clicked a button to record.

“Well,” started Chorus, “We are hosting the Sonderson’s for a week. You remember Trance I think. He stayed with us last summer. This is his family,” Chorus said and made quick introductions. He continued to get to the point, “Trance, his older brother Kyle and my boy Martin were just target shooting over there on the far side of the barn. While they were standing there someone shot an arrow at them. Well at Trance in particular.”

Geridan turned to Trance and asked, “Is that true?”

“Yes sir,” Trance replied. In short order he told the sheriff about being shot at earlier in the year and about what had just happened. With a quick glance at Kyle he stopped short of expressing his thoughts about whom he suspected. “We were over there,” he added and pointed to the spot where he had stood, “And the arrow landed there.”

The sheriff looked at the area where Trance said that he stood and then to where the arrow had struck the ground. “Could you show me exactly where and how you were standing?”

Trance nodded and led the way to the spot and somehow knew everyone was following. He arrived at the spot, as best he could and faced the way he was standing when the arrow flew at him. Then in a flash he grabbed Sammy and pulled him in front of him as he said, “I was right here facing this way when Sammy came up to me, and he was right here when the arrow flew out.” And then as he saw that the sheriff had turned the all-purpose comp pad to video record him and the surrounding area, he added, “I heard something, no, I guess that I just thought I heard something and realized that another arrow had been shot at me and I reacted and dove knocking down Sammy to protect him and then Kyle sent Martin back to the house and ran toward the forest to try to find the shooter. I stood up and sent Sammy back to the house and then I got up and followed Kyle.”

Geridan panned the comp pad and then stopped and looked again at the arrow. He was an expert marksman and was suddenly startled to realize what could have happened. “Both of you just stand there a moment longer.” He came around and looked straight at Trance and Sammy and then passed them to where the arrow was still in the ground. “Where did you find where the archer was standing?”

“I found the spot straight out there maybe fifty yards beyond the ditch,” Trance replied.

With a critical eye Geridan looked where Trance pointed and took a couple steps that direction before looking back at Trance. Then he moved slightly to see where the arrow was still embedded in the ground. Trance noticed the concern in the sheriff’s eyes. “What is it, sheriff?” Trance asked.

“Yes sheriff,” Evan Sonderson added. “What are you thinking? Do you think someone is really trying to kill my son?”

Geridan looked at Evan and everyone gathered around. He held a hand out to keep Trance and Sammy in place and stepped up to them. “I know someone just tried to kill your son, and not only him,” he said and indicated Evan to come to where he was standing. “If I’m right, and I’m certain that I am, that if Trance had not reacted when he did, you would have lost both sons. That arrow would have hit right here,” he said pointing at a point in the back of Sammy’s neck and then pointed at Trance’s heart.

Eileen approached her husband and felt her heart stop as she saw where Geridan had indicated. She looked back with fright thinking about the archer still out there and had already taken two shots at her son. Would he try again?

Geridan turned to ask, “Now did you say that the shooter's spot was fifty yards from here or fifty beyond the ditch?”

“I’m sure it’s about fifty yards beyond the ditch,” Trance replied. He was surprised and curious about what Geridan was thinking.

Suddenly Geridan addressed two of the deputies, “Allerg you take off and patrol the Rosestone road and patrol for anyone on horseback from the west, and Eltrim you take off and patrol Rosestone from the east. Do not waste any speed and notify the office to double the patrol in town for this archer.” Both men were slightly taken and quickly saluted and took off for their horses and in moments were speeding off in opposite directions. Geridan took an appraising look at the distance between Trance and Sammy and the ditch and then to the arrow.

“Well sheriff what is it,” Chorus asked as he watched his friend looking more serious.

“I think this was a very dangerous archer, maybe one of the most dangerous I’ve heard about,” Geridan finally said. “If I’m right the archer had a very powerful longbow or high powered compound bow. He was also deadly accurate. If I stood with my longbow about that far away I might have been able to hit Trance at this distance and kill him. Fortune must have smiled at you that you dove when you did, but look how far the arrow went after missing you. I’ll take some measurement real quick and then Rouber will go with Kyle to where the archer took off on his horse and Trance, you will take me to where the archer stood.”

“Yes sir,” Trance replied and watched as Geridan took up his comp pad and tapped it a couple times. Trance relaxed as he stood in place and suddenly caught sight of Margaretta reaching into her pocket and taking out a small pad and taking notes of what the sheriff was doing. He looked back at the sheriff and watched him also.

Geridan aimed the comp pad at the necessary locations and then down at the pad. He was astounded at the figure that appeared. The arrow had flown a good one hundred and twenty yards and three bows were listed as being able to shoot the distance. One was a Regent Power Longbow; another was the Kristeen Vuter Longbow, the third being the Thunderhead bow. They weren’t quite rare, but were unique and expensive enough that certainly whoever had one in this area was the number one suspect in the case. Geridan lifted the comp pad up and tapped another key and spoke into it. “Allerg and Eltrim, you’re looking for anyone with either a Regent Power or Kristeen Vuter Longbow. Also they may have a Thunderhead. Stop anyone with any one of them, and notify the officers on patrol to be on the lookout for any longbow.”

“Sheriff, is there anything we can do to help,” volunteered Gracer’s dad who had finally found a moment to try to help.

“Yeah,” said Gracer at last. What could he do to help? This was one of his best friends and they were both going to try to get in the Golden Griffins. It was hard to believe that someone had just tried to murder Trance and probably killed Sammy at the same time.

“I think my officers will cover this for now. Okay, Kyle take Deputy Rouber to where you went, and Trance, I want you to take me to that spot where the archer stood and then we’ll go from there. The rest of you can stay here, but stay alert. I don’t want this guy still around, possibly taking another shot at anyone,” he said and then indicated for Trance to lead the way.

Trance started off and followed Kyle and the deputy to the bridge and then the two pairs separated as Kyle led the deputy into the woods and Trance took the most direct path he could to the spot. A few minutes later he stood next to the sheriff where the archer had stood. Geridan looked toward where Trance and Sammy had been standing just minutes ago. Like Trance had done a little while earlier Geridan made motions of shooting an arrow and cocked his head and made notes on the comp pad. “Yes, this is the right location. Whoever it was that took that shot was a real expert. If I were you, I’d be very watchful for a while and stay out of the open for a couple days and make sure you’re not alone,” he advised. They headed back to everyone still where the target was set up and waited for Kyle and Rouber to return.

Before Kyle and Rouber got back the sheriff went and finally retrieved the arrow and plucked it out of the ground. Trance heard everyone murmur as he saw the deadly broad and razor sharp arrowhead. All thought that this still might be an accident vanished. The first arrow had been a mere target arrow that could have appeared to be an accident, but this was now clearly proof that out there was someone lurking to take him out. Once again he wondered if the archer was in league with Rex.

Kyle and Rouber finally got back and Kyle took one look at the arrow and then at Trance. Their conversation suddenly played again in his mind and he looked out into the woods for the phantom archer. Who and where was he? Would he try again? Not so strangely, everyone was standing there facing the forest with him and thinking the same thing.

Chapter 4

Encounter at Arias

The planet Arias seemed to float peacefully in orbit of its sun, an ancient yellow star. Five irregular continents took up just under a third of the planet’s surface where once a very sophisticated and ancient civilization had sprung up. Mysteriously the civilization had vanished and the planet's primordial forests and jungles had reclaimed much of the surface covering ruined cities. There had been many archeological digs over the centuries; however, the last one had been a thousand years ago. Now an interstellar ship was approaching, racing across the galaxy.

Like a huge raptor the eight hundred foot long Griffin galleon with its seven hundred and fifty foot wingspan soared through space. Shaped like an eagle in flight and powered by 6 hyper engines the galleon was the elite front line space battleship of the Griffins. On board in the command chair in the cockpit sat the commander, a very regal Griffin in his ornate scaled armor. Well, feathered would be the correct term for the armor as each scale was shaped like a feather. His sleek golden brown feathers on his head and gleaming beak gave him a glow. Eyes of amber focused on the main view screen in front of him and in the middle and slightly behind the flyers as they sat in their positions farthest forward in the cockpit and each individually behind one the forward viewports, commonly called the ships eyes. Just then his concentration was broken as the communications officer addressed him.

“Excuse me my Lord. There is a communication coming in from Graffes,” the Griffin said and before continuing he looked back at his screen and looked back at his commander in surprise. “It is High Admiral Phayllet, and he is asking for you.”

The commander turned his eyes on the communications officer and a muscle tweaked just above his beak. “Well, since it is the High Admiral, I think we should hear what he has to say.” He nodded and casually looked as the main viewer changed and suddenly he was looking at an older Griffin with brown and white speckled head feathers.

“Commander Thazz, I have an important message for you from his Highness King Zaethor. You and your ship the Brazen Beak are being recalled immediately,” Admiral Phayllet snapped.

“No pleasantries,” Thazz said in a calm, almost bored voice. “We are out in the galaxy surveying future archeological sites for his Highness as you know. What is so important that we are being recalled?”

“I know exactly why you are out and about. However, we have lost your location somehow. Never mind that for the moment, the important thing is that you are needed back here now and that should satisfy you. By the way where are you now,” Phayllet growled.

The muscle above Thazz’s beak pulse again as he tried hard to contain his emotions and have a reasonable answer. In fact he’d planned this answer for weeks, and he didn’t think he would be addressed in this way. “My crew and I are just now approaching Juthia now. There is a dig site we were going to inspect. Are you sure you are not reading us.”

Phayllet’s eyes squinted as he thought about Thazz’s reply. Juthia was certainly far enough out that the Brazen Beak would not be detected. Yet why was the ship not detected heading that direction? In fact, as he thought about it, the last time the Brazen Beak had been on screen had been two and a half months ago and was heading in the opposite direction of Juthia. Why were they out of contact for that long? Well it was not like anyone was worried about them. Thazz was one of the best commanders in the Griffin fleet. Yet he had been feeling slightly uneasy around Thazz lately. Nothing definite or concrete, just something barely detectable that he seemed to notice and make his head slightly twitch. What to do and say, Phayllet thought. He was on a mission from his Highness, yet he had been given these orders by his Highness himself just minutes ago. Probably a moment too long he decided.

“Thazz, I have my orders directly from his Highness and they are to command you and your ship to return to Graffes immediately. You can take any issues up with the King on your return.” With a flicker of movement the communication was cut.

Thazz sat in his command chair staring at the planet Arias that had popped up on screen the moment Phayllet cut communication. Interesting, he thought, I wonder what is going on back home, hum. We will head home Phayllet, he continued to think, only after I get what I’m here for.

Behind him a door swung open and two of his most trusted compatriots entered the bridge. They had stayed out of sight the moment they knew Phayllet was on the communicator. It was not without reason. It was obvious at a glance that they were different and did not belong. Entering first was Mallint an Aicipetrudean, much like Griffins except they have the head wings and claws of a hawk and the body of a panther. His dark brown feathers, almost black and speckled with grey and a scarred beak certainly made him stand out. The being that stepped in next definitely did not look like he belonged, especially here. With a head and wings of a buzzard and the body and legs of a hyena Vyll was a supreme example of his race. For eons the Gyeanorrs have plagued neighboring worlds and took pleasure in havoc and slaughter. At times the Griffins were hard pressed trying to keep the Gyeanorrs in line while defending other worlds from the approach and influence of the Sphinx.

“What did Phayllet want,” inquired Mallint.

“Not much, he wants us to return to Graffes. We shall return to Graffes only after we get what we’re here for. Are your forces ready for landing,” replied Thazz.

Vyll stood there and a shiver of excitement shot through his body. “My troops are ready, Thazz. All are prepared and ready to go. When do you think we will land?”

“It won’t be long now. Head back and wait. I will join you when we are five minutes from landing so we can disembark and make our way to the temple,” Thazz said as he turned his attention away from them and again gazed at his target.

The pair departed and headed back to the bowels of the ship where a cohort of four hundred and eighty soldiers waited in feathered armor and a variety of razor edged blade weapons. Almost a fourth carrying winged spears and another forth armed with vertical crossbows. These crossbows were much like the traditional crossbow with the bow in a horizontal position, however, the bow and in some cases two bows were in a vertical position and these particular bows had a magazine of bolts that lifted and placed a bolt in place every time the string was pulled back and locked into firing position. Even the double bows had a specially designed magazine with bolts for both bows.

A few minutes later Thazz strolled into the disembarking area arrayed in his shimmering armor and in his clawed hand he held his sleek helmet shaped much like an ancient Greek helm that conformed to his head and left his lethally sharp beak exposed. “Mallint, get the cohort in order, we’ll be landing in about four minutes. Vyll, are your birds ready.”

“Yes my Lord, my birds are here and ready. They have their helms in place; no one will see them and know they are anything other than ordinary Griffins. I have my own helm here,” Vyll said as he indicated his bronze colored helmet shaped exactly like Thazz’s only with the addition of fake feathers inside to conceal his baldhead.

“Excellent. This should not take long. We have located the most probable place for the temple to be hidden and we shall land in the area very soon. Once we disembark it should not take us long to get to the temple and then find the Talenth stone,” Thazz declared.

“Attention, this is the bridge. We are approaching the landing area now. Everyone hold on and prepare for landing,” squawked a voice over the ship's PA.

Everyone in the disembarking area looked for and found seats and settled in as they felt the ship make final approach and descend to the planet’s surface. The mechanized sound of the landing gear lowered and six retro thrusters kicked in and the massive ship slowed and descended. Moments later they felt the ship touchdown and settle as they bounced slightly. It took the ship’s systems three minutes to settle and shift to a sitting position.

Thazz stood and with a nod to his Cohortan, the major over the cohort. Avreen, a dark brown-feathered Griffin that was over the three leagues, each league had one hundred and sixty soldiers making up the cohort. Avreen stood and looked to his three Leages or captains of the leagues. The three Leages were Malint, Vyll, and Nollath and they immediately called up their leagues and began organizing them ready to disembark and proceed with their mission. Boldly Thazz strode to the head of the column of the cohort and waited as a deck officer lowered the loading ramp.

As the ship's loading ramp lowered a bright early morning sky was seen and soon a bright green glade met their eye. Almost twenty yards away was the edge of a forest at the foot of a hillside. Thazz looked around the scene with his helmet still in his taloned hand and the hilt of his broadsword shining brightly in the sun and his round telvian shield with his bronze eagle emblazoned on it in a sky blue field on his left arm. A slightly smaller Griffin lined up just behind him fully armored and wielding his shield with a variant of the bronze eagle on blue and a large winged spear. Normally this Griffin would carry the standard of Thazz, however, this day Thazz insisted that they do not advertise that they were here.

Behind him the cohort lined up and prepared to follow him. Thazz felt the breeze in his feathers and he closed his eyes for a moment to focus all of his primal instincts to lead him to his goal. He opened his eyes and took a step forward and then more confidently led the cohort down the ramp and started them across the meadow. Vividly he remembered the route he had plotted from his information on the location of the temple. In minutes the cohort had crossed the meadow and entered the forest at the foot of the small hill southwest of where they had landed. The air was crisp and clear as they strode as silently as they could through the pristine wood. Thazz took particular pleasure in the fresh evergreen smells and the silence of the woods. His keen eyes swept from side to side taking in every detail of the path ahead that he was following. Indeed it seemed that he had somehow led his cohort to an ancient path through these woods.

Instinctively he knew that his Cohortan and Leages were carefully leading the birds and following closely. Every bird kept his weapon ready and his eyes were on careful look out for potential dangers. None even considered that they would encounter any dangers here. This world had long been believed abandoned by its ancestral inhabitants. Four archers at the rear of the column kept their vertical crossbows trained down the path they came and walked backward keeping careful watch for any dangers that may pop up and try to surprise them from the rear.

Thazz followed the ancient path that now took him and his cohort up another hill and wound down to his left and then suddenly took a sharp turn to the right and led him to climb a mountain. At first the grade of the slope was not too great, yet the higher they climbed the greater the grade in the path became. Thankfully Thazz could see that the path did not take them to the summit and over to the other side, instead it wound and led them to another mountain and for a few minutes Thazz lost track of the path he had been following. He stopped for a moment to regain his bearing and everyone in the cohort took a moment to get a quick drink from his water flasks.

Suddenly Thazz swung his head around. What was that he thought? Something had registered in his brain. Was it a sight, he slowly and carefully looked around and did not see anything. Maybe it was a sound. He closed his amber eyes and once again slowly turned his head. No, it was not a sound; however, there was a scent tickling his olfactory senses. Strange, the scent was so faint yet distinct. Curious, nothing he saw or heard could account for the scent. Maybe it was just nothing. Oh well let’s get going we’re already halfway to our goal.

“All right, everyone shape up. We don’t have far to go now. Forward,” Thazz commanded. Immediately the Cohortan and Leages started giving orders and again the cohort formed up and they were on the move again.

They marched on and Thazz felt more excited and nervous at the same time. He knew that they were closing on the best location of where the temple might be. They’d have to cross a wide valley that leads to a narrow pass and finally through a last stretch of dense woods. To his annoyance there was the scent in the air again this time slightly stronger. Nothing in his other senses alarmed him so he pushed thoughts of the scent aside and continued marching. At last he could tell that the valley was a few yards away and he nearly quickened his pace along the path. In moments he stepped out and led his cohort into the valley when suddenly a fletched spear flew from off to the right and stuck in the ground in front of him and he immediately stopped and glared in the direction the spear had flown from.

The cohort scrambled and swarmed up and around Thazz. Silently forty-three armored men stepped out of the right side of the valley and just as silently forty-two armored men came out of the left. Their armor was composed of light armor plate over quilted tan leather. Their helmets were shaped like a jungle cat with the face plate shaped like the cat’s fierce face and lenses for the wearer to look out the cat’s eyes. All of the men were equally armed with small round shields emblazoned with ancient symbols and animal images and hung like swords were macuahuitls. The hilt and carefully shaped shaft was made of hardwood and along the edge glinted with dark blue crystals like glowing razor blades and in leather sheaths were daggers made of the same crystal and some men were even carrying heavy wood and crystal clubs.

As Thazz and his cohort looked the men over they also noted that the men facing them were evenly divided in four groups. One fourth of the men were armed with atlatls, spear throwers, and a long quiver full of light fletched spears like the one in the ground in front of Thazz. Another fourth had a slightly smaller atlatl to throw darts, slightly larger than arrows but just as accurate and deadly. The third group was armed with laminated recurve bows and arrows while the last group had simple fibrous slings. While the archers had a quiver of arrows, the sling throwers had leather bags that bulged with carefully shaped and deadly projectiles. Many of the men with atlatls also wielded long lances. The Griffins noted that the lances, spears, darts, and arrows were all tipped with the same blue crystal.

One of the men raised his right hand up and looked sternly at a man who must have thrown the spear. The man’s more elaborate armor and animal print cloak signified that he was the leader. They resembled a troop of space age Aztecs. The leader signaled one of his men who set shield and spear aside and approached as the leader reached up and took his elaborate helmet off and handed it to the summoned man. The leader then strode toward the Griffins and twenty feet away he bowed and addressed Thazz.

“I am Major Huzital. I greet you mighty Griffins. I apologize for this spear. The man who threw it will be dealt with. We are surprised to see you here. Where are you headed, may we guide you,” he said cordially.

Thazz kept his surprise hidden as he stood still and considered Huzital. Hmm, this major could be of use. I must also let my allies know that this world is inhabited after all. A mistake that will be remedied shortly, but as for now he might be useful. Tilting his head slightly he said, “Major Huzital, I am Lord Thazz. My birds and I are here to check on the Great Arias Temple. We have been ordered here to check it out and secure the treasure.”

Huzital looked surprised. This was very unusual. His troop of jaguar knights was here for practice drills while protecting the temple. It was in their records that no one, not even a Griffin had been to their world for seven millennia. His race had kept accurate records for eons. He had even read some of the records of the ancient past and had been surprised to read about star chariots having set out to explore the next galaxy over. Eventually some of the star chariots had returned with glorious tales of a planet they had discovered. It had been a system of nine planets. They had landed on the third planet from the sun and on a continent south of the equator and mixed with the native people there. Then feeling the time was right for them to leave they had once again boarded the star chariots and flown back home. They had called the planet Talenth.

“The Great Arias Temple is near. We would be honored to take you there, but you should know…” Huzital said when he was cut off.

“Wonderful, we would be honored for your escort,” Thazz said and signaled the cohort to form up again and waited impatiently as Huzital called his men together and took the lead as Thazz joined him. Huzital took a path that Thazz had not seen and went a different direction from where he had been leading. Well, this was amazing luck. In twenty-five minutes they were approaching a clearing and suddenly they entered a wide-open area with a vast stepped pyramid.

Thazz opened his beak and shook his head in awe. The temple stood looking both ancient beyond ancient and ageless. It was also obvious that the temple had not been used for untold millennia. Thazz looked around at the empty surrounding area with the only people here being his cohort and Huzital’s men. Perfect.

Thazz stepped up as Huzital turned to him and indicated the temple. “Here is the Great Arias Temple, but once again I must ask you why you are here. You must know that the…” He never finished his sentence as Thazz struck him down with his sword. One of Huzital’s men had been watching the two closely as they had stood together and he had not seen the Griffin draw his sword until it was about to strike. Shock shook the man for a moment. Why would a Griffin, one of the most remarkably noble beings in recorded history of the galaxy, pull his sword and strike down their leader. Vengeance flooded his system in a moment and with a silent movement of his hand he made the command to strike a moment before a Griffin arrow struck him in his side.

The wound wasn’t immediately fatal so he drew his maquahuitl and he swung it and caught a Griffin in the throat. A heartbeat later three more arrows struck him and ended his life, but his command had been seen as well as his action and death. In less than a heartbeat the men and Griffins turned on each other and a brutal battle ensued. Thazz’s birds were completely surprised at the skill, tenacity, and lethality of the men’s weapons. They had thought them very primitive; however, the crystal weapons punched straight through the Griffin armor just as neatly as the Griffin metal blades carved through the men.

Blood and flesh flew everywhere for fifteen minutes. In the end Thazz and his cohort stood bloody and victorious. One of Huzital’s men was still moving and he rose up to throw a last dart that caught an unsuspecting Griffin at his heart taking him down. Another Griffin unfolded his wings and took to the air and flew the fifteen feet to the man and brought his axe up and brought it down removing the man’s head from his shoulders. Thazz shook his feathers and with the battle over reached down and ripped Huzital’s cloak from his corpse and used it to wipe his blade off with it before sheathing it again in his scabbard. He looked over the slain men and took a count of slain birds. To his surprise he had lost nearly a third of his cohort. How did this happen? He would have to see to more training of his soldiers to make them more efficient.

“Vyll, organize the cleanup of this mess. Remove our dead birds so we may return them to a proper place of burial. They should be honored for giving their lives for our cause. Take the men also. I assume you will find suitable use for them. Make it so nobody knows what happened here and that there is no evidence that we were here,” Thazz commanded and turned his back on Vyll and the remnants of his league. In front of him was what he had come for. There was nothing to stop him from securing the treasure. At last the Talenth Stone was within his grasp.

Chapter 5

Glyph Stone

The Great Arias Temple stood before Thazz like a present just waiting to be opened. While he heard Vyll and his league call to their ship for reinforcements and body wagons he turned to Avreen, his Cohortan, Mallint, and Nollath and had them form up the remaining birds. Thazz took the lead again with a new standard bearer just behind him and closely followed by the remnants of the cohort.

Unhindered, they marched toward the temple. The rough forest path soon became an ancient paved road. Arrogantly Thazz now stalked ahead and gazed around. There were ruined walls broken down and overgrown with foliage and once beautiful gardens that had long grown wild. The road itself was broken in places without number and in some places the road was overgrown with ground cover. The small stretch that Thazz walked across now was an intricate marvel. Unseen by the passing Griffins it was a mosaic that looked like two swirling galaxies. Further on they passed another road mosaic that appeared to be an ancient Arian next to what must have been a star chariot.

As he continued on Thazz was struck by the massive size of the temple. “Oh my,” said one of his soldiers behind him. “Look at the size of this place. And where is the entrance, I only see the stairs that seem to go forever to the summit.”

Thazz glanced back at the soldier and then turned back and focused on the temple. Carefully he scanned the structure and his beak clicked. He stopped the cohort thirty feet away from the building and pointed a clawed finger at a nearby Griffin. “Brim, I need you to fly up and do a thorough inspection. See if you can spy out the entrance for us. Also if you can make sure there is nothing for us to worry about. I don’t want another curious party to find us here.”

Brim stepped up and his great wings unfolded then flapped a couple times lazily and then paused just a moment and then he jumped and the wings made three quick sweeps. He was airborne and his wings continued to beat the air as he flew up and soared along the first step of the pyramid. Curious, he thought, there are the steps that go straight up the temple, but no entrance here. Brim flew up another level and then another each level was forty feet tall and there were twenty-four levels. The summit was a mighty nine hundred and sixty feet up.

Thazz looked as Brim flew on and on in search of the entrance. Brim for his part was enjoying using his wings and flying around the temple. As his keen eyes continued to scan the building for his objective, he barely noticed that as he passed each level there were great carvings and glyphs along the outside. There was something familiar about the glyphs, well he wasn’t interested in them so he just flew past and as he did he did not even notice the tops of each level that had lines and curves and occasionally a shape of a star or planet. Many of these symbols were faded and worn from long years of exposure to the elements and had eroded, but even the symbols that were still clear Brim passed over and ignored as he sought the entrance to the temple. At last, as he flew up to the fourteenth level he finally spotted the massive double doors. He settled down and landed in front of them and walked toward it.

Brim cocked his head and stepped forward to quickly examine the door before he would fly back down to Thazz and report. The doors were thirty-five feet high and thirty-five feet wide and when opened would make a nearly seventy foot wide opening. He stepped closer and looked for an opening mechanism. Carefully he scanned around both sides of the doors and finally found a lever that had to be the opener. Now that he had found what he was after he unfurled his wings and he took off and flew back down to his leader.

Thazz had seen Brim land and patiently waited. He trusted Brim and knew that he would land and check out the door. Now as he spotted Brim taking to the air again he knew that he would have good news momentarily.

Moments later Brim landed lightly and saluted his commander and addressed him, “Lord Thazz, I found the door. It is on the fourteenth level up. The opening lever is just to the right of the doors and the steps go all the way straight up to them. My estimation is that each level is about forty feet in height.”

Thazz took the information in and nodded. He turned his beaked head up the steps and followed up counting levels. His mind processed the long steep climb. Suddenly he turned and gave the order for a third of his birds to take to the air and provide cover as he and the remaining soldiers took the steps and began the climb. As his clawed booted feet stepped lightly and swiftly up and soon he passed the first level and proceeded up to the second and as before he barely paid attention to the mosaics and carvings. Had he paid attention to them he would have noticed that they were a continuation of how the temple had been built and the species of intelligent beings that had contributed to the construction of the temple. In fact one mural on the fourth level might indicate that there were three mighty temples built, however, they seemed to be in different locations.

Another level up with a few more murals, as before Thazz ignored them and just kept climbing. Level after level they climbed and the shadows of the airborne griffins and others floated past them. Seven levels up and his legs were starting to burn. Two more levels and Thazz did all he could to focus on the climb. He dug deep and pushed forward three more levels. Just two more levels up he thought and took another step and he breathed deeply. With ever increasing leaden legs he took step after step and he took a quick glance back and saw the line of soldiers had stretched down the steps as his birds were breathing hard as they struggled to climb the steps and catch up to him.

One level more and he could take a rest before the door and wait for his birds to catch up to him. His legs felt even more leaden and on fire, it had been years since he had climbed like this and felt his legs this tired. Just four more steps he thought as he pushed on, almost there and then a break and finally we could enter and find what we’re here for. There he was, the last step taken and he saw the wide doors. With real effort Thazz walked a few paces to allow some of his birds to arrive right behind him. He decided that he would wait for all of the stragglers to arrive before opening the door. A few of his birds landed nearby and Thazz had a thought and directed a few of them to fly the rest of the way up to the top of the temple and explore and take look out positions.

After taking a few more deep breaths Thazz finally stood straight and stepped toward the door and signaled one of his soldiers to come up and pull the opening lever. Thazz nodded and the Griffin pulled the lever and suddenly there arose the sound of hidden weights and chains and the doors slowly opened. Moments later a wide entrance showed a large square anteroom. “Bring the torches,” Thazz commanded and moments later several Griffins produced torches that resembled long silver metal tubes that had a glowing softball sized crystal sphere. Thazz directed eight of the soldiers to enter in front of him. Following came more Griffins with torches and other soldiers that gripped their weapons more tightly.

Thazz looked around the entrance area and directed some of the torchbearers to shine light around the walls. Here there were a few more glyphs that directed them to the far left corner where a dark set of stairs waited. With a wave of his hand he motioned the advance group of torchbearers to lead the way down the stairs. One of the Griffins at the top of the stairs found an ancient blackened wood torch in a metal bracket and he took it out and tossed away the ancient useless torch and inserted the brightly glowing torch in the bracket and then he pulled out of his pack another glow torch that he activated with the click of a small round button.

Down they descended to another landing and this time there were a few small hallways that led to rooms and another set of stairs. Again Griffins went off to inspect the halls and rooms and came back as Thazz led the way down another set of stairs. And so they proceeded down, down, and down again with ever more halls and rooms. Thazz kept looking around as he proceeded and spoke quietly at every level to his birds as they explored and came back to him. His beak twitched in impatience as they proceeded. Where was it, how far down would they have to go to find it. It had to be here.

Suddenly he stepped down to another floor and found himself this time in what appeared to be an antechamber. His eyes brightened and his beak twitched as he strode forward into the great room beyond. Now we are getting there he thought as his birds came in around him holding their torches above their heads and shined them around. It was a fairly large room and for a moment Thazz felt like a conqueror.

The vast room was like the inside of a cube, as wide and deep as it was tall. In the center was a square podium that stood four feet tall. Griffins spread out and circled the podium and a moment later Thazz strode in and approached the podium. “At last we find what we are here for,” he declared and walked right up to the podium and reached out a taloned hand and stopped. His head cocked and confusion crossed his eyes. The top of the podium was empty and covered in ancient dust.

With his head tilted Thazz backed up and looked around and had his birds spread out and look around. A quick glance back at the podium told him that there was no sign of what he was after and that it had not been there for unnumbered ages. In frustration he clicked his beak and took in the room more closely. What had at first glance been a magnificent room appeared to be ancient, shabby, and littered with dust and broken pieces of the walls. By chance Thazz looked toward the right and caught a glimpse of a glyph on the wall momentarily lit by a glow torch.

“Stop, and hold your torch there,” he commanded his birds and approached the wall. “Here, light this section of wall.” Other Griffins approached and held their torches to light up the wall. Slowly and gently Thazz ran his hand over what looked like the picture of an ancient procession, not toward the temple they were in, but away from it. “Veen, come here, I need you to translate this for me,” Thazz indicated the wall where he stood.

An aging and scared Griffin approached and pulled out a battered comp pad and aimed it at the wall and he carefully scanned to a point that seemed to be the beginning of what they were looking at. “This might take a moment. Thazz, there are places where words are missing, but I will give you what I can. It starts here,” his withered talon reached out and just lightly pointed to a spot a few feet above their heads. “This,” he started, “continues from another wall. It looks like something Biblical.” He checked the comp pad and clicked his beak in concentration. “Yes it says, ‘And Eluce brought rebellion to heaven and was cast down and he descended and took his fallen followers with him and they scattered across the stars. Eluce led many to,’ I can’t make out the next couple words. Something about a planet in a galaxy, something related to cattle. Here it continues, ‘Eluce will temp and lead many away from the One on high, yet he will meet his end when in time the only begotten comes and he is cast in the, something fire. Then peace shall reign and redemption comes.’”

Thazz nodded and asked, “Very nice, now what about what we are here for does it mention that?”

“Yes,” Veen replied, “It follows thus about early travelers and planetary settlements. Ah and here. ‘Through ages seven temples were built to house the seven Talenth stones so peace could be enjoyed.’ I’m not sure of the next word, ‘Communication made available.’ Strange. Ah, here, ‘Wars and strife swept in and all but two temples are swept away. And to secure the last of the stones, they are removed to a new hidden temple on,’” Veen scratched his chin with a claw, “’A shattered world.’ It does not say where that is, only that, ‘If one looks down he will see the map.’”

Suddenly everyone stood still and looked down and shook their heads. Crazy there was nothing on the floor but dust and debris. Thazz looked back at Veen and asked, “Is that all?”

“No Thazz, there is one more section. This may interest you more. ‘The birds shall circle the crown, an eagle shall strike down a great bat, a,’ there are a couple words missing.” At this Thazz stepped closer and unheard by anyone his boot crushed a fragile bit of stone. “’Lion shall slay the great serpent, and a Griffin, a couple words missing, dragon and, well whatever is missing. Then united shall rise the Griffin General to wage war against the Sphinx and bring peace. Yet peace shall not last, seven shall stand and then the un-chivalrous shall fall and battle the swarm and rise again to regain,’ not sure what, ‘yet fall he shall on his crowning. The deceiver will stand while seven wait. And this seventh will rise and pursue the,’ this is also missing. ‘Day of great battle and the sky will be broken and the only begotten will reveal himself and everlasting peace will come. Redemption will follow and ripple across the stars.’”

Thazz paused to take in what he had heard. “Load of nonsense. Great, we shall have to regroup and try to decipher this to find the stone. Record all of the walls quickly for further study and let us be gone. There is nothing more for us to find here. I’ll have to find the sword and just use it to make my case and trust that is enough.”

Minutes later Veen had completed recording the walls. There was more on one wall that indicated the origin of the universe and rising of the three great ancient beings and then the rise of others including Miniton’s and humans. There was also what indicated early space travel, and wars. Intriguing was a section that indicated a group that went into hiding for preservation and their eventual return. Who they were was missing from the wall. Maybe when the record was looked at more closely they could discover what they needed.

Thazz led the way out of the temple not pleased to return to daylight empty handed. Unnoticed on the floor, as he stepped away, another piece of stone lying next to one his foot had crushed, flipped over revealing part of a symbol that meant ‘less.’ With a wave of his taloned hand he started down the temple steps and took a small rest before leading his birds back to the Galleon. It seemed to take longer to return to the ship this time and Thazz looked forward to some nest time. As he settled in his room and raged around for several minutes the ship's engines kicked in and lifted the eagle shaped craft up and away. No one on the ship looked down as the ship soared up and past the temple. Had they done so, the squiggles, lines, and markings seemed to line up. Only from directly above looking down could the picture be seen.

Chapter 6

Summer Fading

Mid-morning on the Markem farm found five boys at the practice field. Trance was standing about forty yards out with his bow in hand and three arrows left in his quiver. His older adopted brother Kyle stood to his left holding another bow. Sammy sat on an old empty keg watching his older brother try to score at least seventy-five points with ten arrows at this distance. To the right of Trance stood his friends Gracer and Martin, both boys also held bows.

So far Trance had failed to reach a minimum of seventy-five points. This was the mark he would have to meet to qualify with his bow at Preliminary Training in order to have a chance at making it into the Golden Griffins, the elite knights for the kingdom of Cator on Althora. Of the six contests between the four older boys Trance had been either third or fourth, the third contest he had scored seventy-one points and came in third. Not surprising, Martin and Kyle were pretty evenly matched and rotated who won and consistently scored over eighty points.

Trance pulled another arrow out and nocked the arrow and smoothly raised the bow and drew the arrow back and took careful aim. His current score was forty-nine points so he needed to score twenty-six more to hit his goal. He took a moment longer and aimed slightly higher than his previous shots and released the arrow. With a subtle twang went the bow and bowstring and the arrow zipped through the air moments later hitting the target. Kyle, acting as judge, went up to see where the arrow was sticking out of the target and said, “That was a good shot. You scored eight with that. Not bad.”

Next Martin shot and hit nine. Gracer followed and shot and hit a solid eight. Kyle took his turn and scored nine and turned to Trance. These competitions were helping Trance. He was getting better and better with each bowshot. Carefully he nocked his ninth arrow and carefully drew and aimed just like he had for his eighth shot and let the arrow fly. Kyle went up and called back that he had scored another eight points. Sixty-five points and one arrow left. He took a deep breath and watched the others shoot again. He tilted his head back and growled to himself in impatience. The only way to get seventy-five now was a bull’s-eye for ten points. His turn again, and his hand shook just slightly as he pulled his last arrow and got ready to shoot. Please help me, he prayed as he drew the arrow back. He aimed slightly higher and slightly to his left a touch and released his shot.

Kyle whistled as he stepped up and checked where Trance’s arrow had struck the target. “Wow, you hit the bull’s-eye Trance. Ten points, you did it and have seventy-five points. Now you just need to score when you are at Preliminary Training and you’ll be good.”

“Trance,” Trance’s mother Eileen called. “You have a call. I think you’re going to want to take this.”

Trance had just pumped his fist at his first ten point shot of the day when she called. He stopped and looked at his friends and brothers with a note of confusion. Who would be calling him here? Could it be the Sheriff calling again? The incident with the unknown archer had been two days ago. Well he wouldn’t find out waiting here, so he walked over and left his bow with Sammy and hurried to the house and went in. He found the kytherum, a smaller and less technical kythersig built for ordinary home use for communication. To his utter delight his caller was the best possible person, Princess Corena.

“Hi,” he said as he walked up and sat down in front of the kytherum’s screen. “How are you, Corena,” he said blushing slightly. At least he would get this call with the guys outside waiting for him and the girls in town with Mrs. Markem. He knew that his mother would be discreet and not embarrass him.

Corena had a concerned look on her ordinarily beautiful round face. Her brown curly wavy hair framed her smooth lightly tanned complexion and rosebud lips. Trance could tell from the way her elegant eyebrows arched above her bright brown eyes that she was anxious, a contradiction from what she was wearing. He could see that she was dressed in a pale blue summer dress that accentuated her figure very nicely. If memory serves him right, she was probably dressed for a dinner that the king and queen were hosting for the legislature and her visiting uncle and his family. He had noticed that she always looked elegant no matter what she was wearing, never being showy. Vividly he remembered the velvet gown of deep purple with its short split sleeves at the dance at the beginning of the end of year tournaments.

It wasn’t only her beauty that he loved. That had attracted him obviously, yet there was more to her. There was a confidence in the way she carried herself that was grace and not flaunting a budding woman’s body. She had told him that she felt that her good looks made her self-conscious and that was why she dressed in a pleasing way and not in a showy way. She had friends that were quite attractive and dressed to show off, and she was brought up in a way that she did not want to appear vain in any way. “As princess I know that I am to dress a certain way and look nice, I just don’t want young girls to look at me and think that they need to flaunt themselves to get along. They can dress nice to flatter their figures and still be lady-like,” Corena had told him on their third date. It was this statement that stayed with him and was one of the reasons that he loved her, and also the way she cared about her friends and family. And here she was sitting there with anxiety on her face waiting to see him.

“Are you all right,” she nearly blurted out when he sat down. Suddenly behind her were two little yips. “Yes, I am talking to Trance,” Corena said to her two little dogs. One was white and the other black, Shuggy and Chocky, both resembled Pomeranians. “I think they want to make sure you're okay also. You are all right aren’t you?”

“Yeah I’m fine,” Trance answered. In a way he was slightly surprised that she knew about the arrow already. “I’m wonderful now that I’m talking to you. You look stunning, isn’t the party for your uncle tonight.”

“Forget about that, I want to know that you and your family are all okay,” Corena continued, clearly etching her face.

“Well yeah, we’re all fine. Why are you so concerned? Everyone here is safe and sound. The guy’s and I are just out back and practicing archery and throwing spears, the usual.”

“I mean are you okay from the archer shooting at you,” she said at last.

Trance was surprised; he was not expecting that statement. It had only been two days since the arrow had flown out of the woods at him. So far the Sheriff and his officers had searched and there was no sign of the mystery archer. Curious that no one was even seen in or around town with any of the types of longbows that the Sheriff had mentioned. That kind of bow would have made an impression and been noticed. He or she was just gone and there were no more arrows flying at him or anyone since. Feeling that the threat was gone and knowing that Corena had official functions yet, he did not want to impose or alarm her. However, somehow she found out.

“How did you find out about the arrow,” Trance asked with concern, creasing his face.

“My dad and Sheriff Geridan went to school together and they still talk occasionally. And since the two of us are together my dad probably sent him a message about watching over you. You know how my dad is. He takes being king seriously and looking out for his subjects. Besides, I think he actually likes you. Anyway, Geridan called dad the moment after getting back to his office after investigating where the archer had been. I don’t think he was going to tell me so I would not worry, especially since you were not hurt. Well I overheard him telling my mother about it and he was drafting a note yesterday when I happened upon them and found out.”

Hmm, Trance thought. If she had found out yesterday about the arrow then why did it take her this long to call and check on him? Well, he silently told himself, you didn’t run to call her after it had happened. I guess I did not want to worry her either. “Uh, if you found out yesterday…” he started to say.

“Right after I found out I wanted to call and check on you, but my mother thought it best for me to give you a day for you to calm down after the event. She also thought you might be either involved in the investigation or really upset by being shot at. By the way, why did you not call me after it happened,” she said leaning closer to the screen with a look on her face that clearly stated that he should have let her know he was all right after the Sheriff left.

Trance felt his face flush and stammered a quiet, “I did not want to worry you. I suppose that you know that we searched and did not find the mystery archer. Look, I know this is a bad excuse and I should have called you,” he stammered again, “I didn’t want to take you from your duties. And I’ve been more watchful when I’m out practicing with the guys and Kyle has been keeping his eyes open and been acting as part guard over me any time we’re outside.”

Corena sat back in her chair relaxing more now that she could see that he was okay. Her lips slowly turned up in that smile that he loved so much. “Okay, I’ll let this go for now. So, are you having a good time visiting the Markems? You’ve talked about them a lot. And how’s your archery coming along, have you scored seventy-five yet?”

Trance breathed a pleasant sigh and relayed to her the results of the competitions and how he had just finally scored his first seventy-five. “I just need to remember how I shot that last arrow and get all of my shots to fly that way. With the spear I’ve been consistently getting the appropriate score so I shouldn’t have any issues qualifying. My thought is just to get a regular spear, nothing to fancy.”

Corena smiled and then said, “It took me a lot of practice to be able to score well with my bow. What I do is visualize exactly where the arrow is going even before pulling the arrow out of the quiver and focusing on that exact spot all the way through the draw and fire. Also I try to notice where the breeze is coming from and adjust to it and also for every few yards back I aim slightly higher while using my focusing technique and most usually the arrow goes where I want. Just practice and you’ll get it.”

“Thanks, I’ll do my best to remember that. What are your four weapons going to be to qualify for in the Lady Golden Griffins,” he asked now that their conversation had taken this track.

“Well, I have my sword, bow, and hatchet. I think I’m going to go with a poignard. It’s got a longer slimmer blade than my regular dagger. It’s an excellent parrying and thrusting weapon and I like the fact that I would still have something more than my dagger if in a fight I lose my sword and hatchet.”

“Sounds interesting,” Trance said as he considered it. “You already know what my choices are. Oh, and do you have someone that is going to take care of your furry friends. And how have you been this summer, we haven’t been able to see each other for a while now.”

Corena smiled more broadly. “Yes I have already made arrangements for them to be taken care of while I am away training. I will get to see them a few times, and when I get commissioned they will be brought to me. Now I have plans for us when we get to Voilend for Prelims there are a few places I want to take you. They have this great museum that has all sorts of artifacts and fossils. And connected to it is the Grande Arte Museum with famous paintings and sculptures. And I can’t wait to take you to The Regal Tremuse Theatre. They have live productions of either plays or symphonies all year long on Sabbat, the last day of the week. Also we could have a picnic lunch near the Delane River…” she was saying when she started to giggle.

Trance was so enraptured with her letting him in on her plans for them when he noticed her break off in a fit of giggles. Now in fact she was fully laughing. Confusion crossed his face as he tried to think if he had said or did anything funny. Huh, not that he could think of. Here they were having a great conversation and then this laughter. Before he could ask her what was so funny he heard something move behind him. Slowly he turned his head wondering what might be behind him drawing her attention.

Standing there right behind him were Kyle, Martin, Gracer, and Sammy making googoo and other funny faces. The sight of them took a moment for him to process. He didn’t hear them come in. How long had they been there and when did they start with the faces. For a moment he just sat there with an uncomprehending expression, and then slowly started to half laugh and half grr at them. He swung his head back to face Corena again and saw her still chuckling. He smiled at her, “I’m glad they came in for comic relief.” He took a steadying breath before continuing, “You were about to tell me about a picnic spot.”

Before Corena could respond another voice came through the speaker. “Corena, are you ready? We are waiting for you so we can go down to the entrance hall to greet our guests. Make sure you have your Circlet.”

Corena stood and stepped closer to the screen of her kytherum, “That was my mother and I suppose I have to go.” She blew a kiss at the screen and added, “I’ll try to catch you tomorrow. Maybe you can keep the jesters in line. Have a great day practicing guys.” She reached down and picked up the delicate gold Circlet that resembled an olive wreath with leaves of gold and small morganite stones. The sparkling pink beryl gems sparkled as she reluctantly set the Circlet on her head. Corena looked off to the side and Trance guessed that she was checking herself in a mirror. She turned back to the screen, “I love you and I’ll talk to you soon. And Gracer you might want to check your shirt. Have fun.” A graceful hand reached out and clicked a button and the screen went blank.

With a half grin on his face Trance turned around and suddenly caught sight of what Corena had seen. Gracer somehow had not noticed that he had a bird dropping on his left shoulder. Trance could not keep his face straight as he pointed this out to his friend and the others turned and erupted into fits of laughter. At that moment Eileen, Trance’s mom, came into the room.

“Here Gracer, go change and I’ll get that off your shirt,” she said kindly. “Oh and Trance, I hope you remembered to tell Corena how nice she looked,” she added as Gracer quickly went past her so he could change shirts and the other boys had all turned and headed toward the door.

Silently Trance said, “Dang, I forgot. I’ll let her know next time mom.” He followed Kyle back to the target range and after two more unsuccessful times trying to get seventy-five points, he finally had three competitions in a row scoring over seventy-five.

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“Hey Trance, do you want to come with me to town,” asked Gracer as they had finished clearing up after breakfast. Kyle and Martin were busy watching the start of a chariot race, The Voilend 300. Sammy had made friends with a boy that was a neighbor of the Markems and had stayed over for a night.

“Sure,” replied Trance. He had not had much time to just visit with his friend one on one during their vacation at the Markems. This was their last full day at the farm and they would be heading home the next day. “Do we want to take the horses? Maybe you could borrow one.”

Gracer went and asked his dad to borrow one of the horses and minutes later they were riding down the road to town. “What a great day. I wish we had more time here.”

“Yeah I agree,” said Trance. “This has been a great week, except for the arrow.”

Gracer looked around and took a deep breath. He was mounted on one of the Markem’s robot horses, in fact the very horse that Chorus had been riding and using to plow his field when he had found Trance in his deep sleep chamber. “This has been a good week. I think we’re both prepared for training. Your archery is a lot better now and I don’t think you’ll have too much to worry about the spear. I just hope I can score as well and be able to join with you in the Golden Griffins. My folks were floored when I told them that I was going to try for the Goldens. They knew that I had wanted to be a knight ever since hearing my great granddad telling me about his adventures as a knight.”

“I remember you telling me about that,” Trance said. “I don’t think you’ll have to worry about qualifying. You have your sword, mace, and hatchet and you’re excellent with them. You’re also good with the spear. I just have to keep practicing archery. I’ll just have to concentrate and follow Corena’s advice, and a little prayer for peace to get me through that qualifying.”

“You’ll do great. You’re the best swordsman that I’ve ever seen, and I’ve seen a lot of them, especially at the end of year tournaments,” Gracer said and shifted his six foot one inch frame in his saddle for a more comfortable position. “My folks borrowed some money from both sets of grandparents to be able to afford getting me a warhorse. They just bought it before we came for this vacation. I haven’t even ridden him yet. He’s a blue Muster 25B, they couldn’t afford the upgrades to get me the 25C. I hope to have a chance to ride him and give him a name when we get home.” He moved in his seat again. It made him nervous to have been given a brand new horse when Trance was riding his much older mount.

Trance picked up on his friend’s thoughts and decided to ease his friend's mind. “I’m sure you’ll get a little time to try him out before we head to Prelim camp,” reaching down Trance patted Odin and continued, “I have Odin all ready for the inspection. Kyle said that he should pass for sure with all of the upgrades. One thing that I have wondered about is that according to the copy of ‘Modern Warhorse: A Technical Manual,’ I needed to get Odin up to the standard of a Type 22A. However, when I went to officially sign up at the end of year tournaments before the awards ceremony your older brother Zxane, who was the recruiter for the Golden Griffins told me that it had to be a Type 21D. And the last time I checked on the info web it said Type 20H. Zxane also got Odin’s type wrong and mistook him for a Type 18C.”

Gracer chuckled before saying, “Well the Type 18B looks exactly like a Type 18C. I could see where he made that mistake. The main difference that I know of is that the Type 18B’s were made with a slightly lighter and stronger armor because they made the flight packs for them. There is the regular flight pack like what you have for Odin, and there is also a rare space flight pack. Zxane and Zak have told me that they did not make or sell very many space packs, maybe about a hundred. It might be hard to find one now. If memory serves I saw on the news that they had just passed the new regulations for Golden Griffin qualifying and the new level for warhorses to pass. I think if you followed the Manual to get Odin up to above a Type 22A you would be in great shape.”

“Thank you,” said Trance as he breathed in a sigh. “I appreciate that. I suppose that both of your older brothers helped get you ready for qualifying.”

“Yeah, that definitely helps having them both in. They just did not get the time to spend with me like Kyle did to assist you. Oh well, that is okay. I was just planning to enlist as a regular knight until I met you. With all we went through last year and with you helping me improve my skills I know that I have a real chance of enlisting in the Golden Griffins also. Your archery is coming right along, you should definitely get in.”

“I hope so. I’m not sure what to expect, but at least I have a few friends that will help make this not so daunting. I guess what I am saying is that I’m glad I’m not going into this alone.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’ll be fine; I know you will. I just hope that all of us, you, me, Mandor, and Zam can get in the same squad. Wouldn’t it be great if Hamon, Orazior, and Lamden joined us.”

“That would be fantastic. I don’t know if that could work out. I just hope that Rex and his buddies are in a different squad. I really don’t want to have to deal with him during training. He was bad enough last year during our events and especially at the end of years.”

“I absolutely agree,” Gracer said. He had been there to encourage his friend through all of the altercations between Trance and Rex. He had been unlucky quite a number of times to find himself on the other side of Rex’s sword during Knight class events. Before Trance's arrival, Rex was the undisputed winner of all of the swordsman events and was the most prominent knight prospect in years. In a way Gracer had envied Rex for his size, good looks, and skill. However, he also saw Rex’s vicious side and how arrogant he was. His parents would never let him get away with some of the actions he had witnessed on and off the field that Rex seemed to enjoy doing.

They were almost to town with the houses at the outskirts clearly in view. Fields of ripening vegetation bordered right up to town and was on one side of the street with houses on the other. Trance scanned the various fields and noted that one was of grains, another looked to be growing a root vegetable he tried to place what it was called. The top looked to him a little like a carrot. However, most of the fields were of maaheze, which Trance took to be very close to corn. Chorus had fields of both a sweet variety as well as some that were for animal fodder.

A few minutes later they were riding down the main street headed toward the arcade. After dismounting and hitching them in place Gracer led the way in and in moments they had game tokens and were occupied enough not to notice another horse ride past the glass door. Trance went to the virtual knight game that he had learned to play so well last summer and to his surprise saw that his top score was now fourth on the list. With a pleasant grin he began the game and was soon in the midst of a virtual battle against a host of enemy knights, dragons, and other enemy warriors. Nearly an hour later he was exhausted and had to wipe sweat off his face and he took off the goggles and set them down. Before stepping away he added his name to the top score list, he now had his name in number two and five and if he wanted to scroll down it was listed in six more slots in the top twenty.

Gracer found his favorite racing games and was busy with the reins for a racehorse game. His face was set in an intense look of concentration as he guided the robotic racehorse down the track on the screen and around corners at full gallop. “Come on we’re nearly there,” he said through his clenched teeth. Trance wandered over and looked over his friend's shoulder. “Faster you nelly, come on we have to catch that guy.”

Trance focused on the screen and saw that the horse that was the one Gracer was “riding” was in second place and was slowly catching up to a red racing horse more than three lengths ahead of him and the finish was approaching fast. “Here we go,” Gracer mumbled as he worked the controls and guided his green racehorse down the track and closing on his quarry. Soon he had the horse two lengths back, then one, finally neck and neck. “Now dang it, the finish is right there come on. Woo!” Gracer exclaimed as he saw his results, winning by a nose.

Trance smiled and patted his friends back. A couple hours later both boys left the arcade and mounted their horses. Just as he was about to guide Odin onto the street to ride back to the farm, Trance felt a tickle in his periphery. Odd he thought as he swung his head back and looked. Nothing, he frowned slightly. He knew there had been something, yet nothing in sight. This was getting weird. What did you expect he asked himself, did you think you would see an archer lining a shot up on you? He turned back and soon Odin was trotting down the street followed by Gracer on the plow horse.

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A figure leaned back out and watched his quarry ride off again. This was not the right time or place. Too many people around to take another shot, plus the sheriffs were on the lookout for an archer, especially when Trance was around. Now he would have to wait again. Fine he could continue to track, another opportunity will come along.

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Back at the Markems, Trance and Gracer soon got with Kyle and Martin and they headed to the practice range for more fun. Three happy hours later Heather and Martina came out and called the boys in for dinner. Trance was elated to see another fantastic feast and sat at the loaded down table.

As they ate, Trance and Gracer were asked about their day. Gracer proudly talked about his skill at the games, especially the horse race game win. Trance was probed about how he had done and as always he humbly answered that he had done okay and confirmed Gracer’s wins.

“Gracer is the real game player. I did okay at the games I played, but we had a great time,” Trance said as Chorus pressed him.

“Oh come on Trance. You went up to that virtual knight game and set the top score again. I think you must have been getting to the total end game,” Gracer said.

Trance felt his face flush. “I did okay I guess. It has been a while since I had played that so it took me a few minutes to get into the swing of the game. And I think I was close to the end when I was eliminated. Oh well, maybe next time. I’ll bet training won’t be quite like that. I’d almost bet that we have a lot of work to do like the proper way to handle our weapons and the various strategies to combat our opponents.”

“You’re right Trance,” Kyle added. “They will show you both the aggressive and defensive stance with your weapons and the various forms of combat with each weapon and how to defend against any knight with any weapon. You’ll also learn and strengthen your shield arm to take blows and how to use it in an offensive way. That is just the beginning before you get to take part in being in a group and having to work in a cohesive troop.”

“In a way it sounds like farming,” Chorus said. “You need to know all of your tools, what they’re for and how to use them. That is before you decide what to plant and what animals to raise; each one has different needs. With the plants you need to know when to plant and how to fertilize and how long before you can harvest.”

“That is an interesting way to put it,” Evan said. “I wouldn’t have thought of it that way.”

“Well I just pray that we are not on the verge of a war. I want both you boys to stay safe and near to home,” Maxine said as she nodded to Eileen and Thara.

Eileen looked at her son and felt a tear at the corner of her eye. All too soon she knew Trance would be off to learn how to be a knight. She continued to pray for him and Kyle for their continued safety and that if any war came they would be out of the service at that time.

Trance took another bite and caught sight of his mother’s eye. He could guess what was going on in her mind. Words escaped him for what to say that might ease her mind. He said a silent prayer that all would be well and that he was placing himself in the Lord’s care as he learned how to be a knight so he could defend the kingdom. Somewhere in the back of his mind he brought up the thought of the archer. Who was the archer and why was he the target? Would he show up somewhere along the way and take another shot at him? He would have to be more careful as he went to training.

Suddenly another thought crashed in. Could the archer be connected to Rex? He did not know and then would he have to deal with Rex. How ugly could that get if Rex was in his troop. Oh boy, this was getting more complicated. Then Gracer’s dad spoke and drove those thoughts away.

“And Princess Corena will be training at the same camp, is that not right Gracer.”

“Yeah dad, I think that is right. That is going to make training more interesting. They’ll probably have more security around the place. That should ease your mind mom. We’ll be even safer training,” Gracer said with excited shining eyes.

Trance however had another thought. What if the Boulthorians come and try to abduct her again. Also what about her plan to take him places, will they have more security on their dates? How complicated this was getting. Well that was in the future, there was breakfast in the morning and the trip home first. He sat back and took another bite.

Chapter 7

Secret Communiqués

Clash, clash, clash went the two blades. Vengethor took a step back and evaluated his sparring partner. Roamer was his best friend and ally and the next best swordsman, next to Vengethor and Axlor of course. Roamer had stepped back also and held his sword in readiness. They were aboard Vengethor’s ship the Quarvalian Horn and since they had a few hours to themselves they agreed to practice.

Vengethor took the next move and strode in with his sword high and drove in. Roamer reacted instantly and blocked the blow and beat his friend and Prince back a step and swung in on him. Clash, clash went their blades as they moved and counter moved on each other. Their skill astonished anyone that should come upon them in the practice room. Vengethor moved with grace and power and Roamer reacted with equal power and skill.

Taking some extra breaths Roamer asked, “So what are our orders? We have been sent out here near the spacial border. What are we waiting for?”

Vengethor swung a couple times before responding. “I don’t know completely yet. Father wants us here for a few months. I think we are preparing war games. However, I found out that he is about to get a personal call from the Sphinx King.”

Roamer lowered his sword at the wrong moment and Vengethor swept it out of his hands. “What? The Sphinx King is calling King Axlor in person. Something really must be up. Maybe we will get some real action soon and then you will have what we desire. Corena will be ours, oh, yours.”

Vengethor stood proudly for a moment and then stepped over and retrieved Roamer’s sword. In a couple strides he handed the excellent weapon back to his friend. “Yes, we shall have her, and with her we will have Althora in our power.” Moments later their blades clashed again as they continued to spare.

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Thazz sat in his command perch on the Brazen Beak. With his taloned hand he scratched under his chin and contemplated what to say. He was scheduled to call Bazar in a few minutes when the communications were set up to hide their position from the Griffins. “One more minute and we are all set,” the bird at the kythersig said.

Grr, this is terrible. We don’t have the stone and we are still translating the writings from the temple. What should I say? “Thank you, I’m about ready,” said Thazz trying his best to hide his inner thoughts.

A minute later and the screen on his kythersig lit up and there was the contemptuous face of Bazar. “Ah Thazz, I hope you have good news for me. I have a special meeting with his Highness and I hope to let him know of your success.”

Thazz did his best to sit straight and look directly at the screen to compose his thoughts. “We made it to Arias as scheduled and met very minor resistance in an unfortunate troop of the locals. Then we proceeded to the temple and made our way in. However, unfortunately the stone was not there. It must have been moved, when and where we do not know. It seemed that the temple had been empty for eons. We did find glyphs on the wall and we recorded them and we are making efforts to translate them. It may be that the time and location of the stone is recorded there. As soon as we have this information we will move at top speed to retrieve the stone. This is only a bump in the road.”

Bazar’s face darkened as he took this news. “That is very unfortunate. His Highness will not be pleased. This bump as you call it may throw our carriage. We must have that stone, the Griffins can’t get it first.”

“We are doing our best. I have my best bird studying the scans and it will not take him long to know the answer for us. If the stone was removed it was taken someplace and that place can be found. Once we have that stone not only will Althora bow to us, but the rest of the galaxy will fall in line also. Have faith Bazar, this bump will be smoothed out very soon.”

“Do not fail in this attempt. It would be best if our road to victory had no bumps or stones. Axlor has his own stone to remove. In just a few months he will have his war party gathered and the Boulthorians will swarm on the outpost outside of Caldora and Corena will be ours. King Maximus will be forced to bow to us and finally Althora will join us. The other planets will not stand without Althora to lead them.”

“Excellent plan Bazar. I wish Axlor all success. I look forward to hearing about Corena’s capture. I am confident that when Axlor has her and I have the stone all I need is the sword and the Griffins will also fall at our feet,” Thazz said.

Bazar smiled smugly, “Yes, we are getting steps closer to our ultimate goal. And with you on our side, the Griffins are clueless. We will stroll through the shadows and let the Griffins focus their efforts on those ancient and pointless prophecies and wait for their savior who may or may not ever appear, oh, that is right I am talking to him right now. Good speed to you and let me know the moment you have the location of that stone and you are on your way to its location. May your efforts be as fruitful as Axlors,” Bazar responded as he ended the communication.

Thazz sat back and took a few moments to contemplate his conversation before reaching out a clawed finger to touch the onboard comm. In a moment he spoke with Veen, his translator. “Have you made progress on the scans from the Arian temple?”

“Yes Thazz, I have been making progress. It has been slow, I have had to use five different translation programs to get as far as I have gotten. It does appear that the stone was removed some ages back, I am not exactly sure yet. However, I think I might have a lead on where the stone was taken. It was removed to a new temple that was hidden and built on a ruined or shattered world, and there are many ruined worlds that I am coming across. I am not sure which one; there are clues that seem to be missing that would narrow down my search. There is the possibility that the world had once had a powerful populace, and possibly something about its moon or lack of. I am still working on it and I will keep you informed.”

“Thank you Veen. Keep me updated on all of your efforts,” Thazz said and relaxed on his perch.

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Bazar sat back in his private chambers in the royal Sphinx palace. He would now have to take this report to his Highness and what would he say. He glanced at his day glass hanging on the wall. He had moments to present himself so he stood and headed to his door and stepped through to the long wide ivory hall. With his back stiff and a confidence that was slightly wavering he made his way to the antechamber royal and then the royal throne room. All too soon he was there and prepared to enter the antechamber.

Once properly announced and let in, his credentials were again checked and he entered the vast throne room and was presented to King Hunratuuth, the mighty Sphinx King. Hunratuuth was an impressive being when he stood at a massive seven feet three inches tall. “Welcome Bazar, come sit, and let me know what you found out.”

Bazar marched forward to the seat he was directed toward and sat down and looked up at his king. “Highness, I have just spoken to Thazz. He made it to the Arian temple and unfortunately did not find the stone.”

“What,” said Hunratuuth with the embers of fury in his voice, “Where is the stone? We must have it.”

“Apparently Thazz said that they recorded the glyphs on the walls and his best translator is working on them to discover the new location of the stone. I left him express instructions to contact me immediately when he has the location of the stone, and I emphasized the importance of him finding it before the Griffins. As yet I do not believe they are onto our plans so Thazz should have free space to make his search.”

Hunratuuth sighed heavily and sat back. Disappointing, but there was nothing he could do about that. If it was moved and hidden again, well maybe Thazz’s translator will figure out where and he could get there and retrieve the stone before anyone was aware that it was found. Now there was the other important matter. “That issue will resolve itself, for now we have to contact Axlor and discover how far he is with the instructions we gave him.” With a signal of his hand a large kythersig screen descended from the ceiling.

There sat Axlor on his throne from Boulthora. He looked calm, yet unseen his cheek twitches. “Greetings exalted Hunratuuth, and greetings to you Bazar. How may I serve you.”

“Greetings to you Lord Axlor, you may serve me by letting me know how you are doing with the instructions I gave you,” Hunratuuth said.

Axlor took a moment to answer, “I have fulfilled everything you have instructed me. I have Vengethor and his ships stationed near neutral space performing war games. I also have my best commanders summoned for this exercise and they are in readiness for when Corena has completed her training and is in command of her unit. Then we await the call from Dew to know that she is at the outpost and ready to be plucked. Then we shall swoop down and get her.”

“Excellent,” Hunratuuth said. “It seems that the harvesters are ready. I hope the fruit is ready at the proper time.” He paused as he gazed at the screen and this time spotted the twitch. “I have one more instruction for you. I want you to lead the harvesters in this. It is time that this fruit is plucked and collected, no mistakes will be tolerated this time. Make sure that you succeed Axlor.”

This time Axlor did not try to hide the twitch and sat straighter looking from the screen at his ally and King and said, “As you say my King, I will join the harvesters at the right time and lead the harvest. May the stars always shine on your kingdom and the galaxy ring of your praise.” On Boulthora Axlor made a swift move and communication was cut off.

“I think Axlor is not happy with that,” Bazar said, sitting back with a slight grin creasing his face.

“Yes, I agree. I do not think he was happy about that at all.” Hunratuuth smiled and looked keenly at Bazar. “Sometimes those that serve you need to be reminded of the fact that they serve. This time hopefully we shall have the result that we need.”

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On Althora at the main instructors barracks at Gaffordsville Captain Jaymmol sat in his quarters pleasantly talking to his friend Hollen. Both men served in the Bronze Guard. This division of Golden Griffins was specially dedicated to protecting the royal palace and family till death. Both men had been surprised by their summons, yet they waited for their instructions.

Just then Jaymmol’s kythersig buzzed. He reached over and activated the device and it rose out of his desk and he looked at a pixelated face. Curiosity creased his dark coppery face. He was almost sure of who was talking to him and Hollen, both knew enough not to say anything as their caller addressed them.

“Good day sirs. I hope both of you had a good ride to Gaffordsville.”

“Yes sir, we had a very good ride here and we have some of the best quarters, we thank you. How may we serve you,” Jaymmol said courteously.

“You are both very welcome. Now the time has come that I let you know why I summoned you there. There is a new knight coming to Voiland and Gaffordsville, I want the two of you to see that this knight gets the fairest shot at being a knight and proceeding to be a Golden Griffin. I also want you to see that his horse passes the trials.”

Both men looked at each other in surprise and curiosity. Who could this knight be and why was it so important that they make sure he advances. They soon learned more. “The name of this knight is Trance and his horse is Odin. I know that the horse is a Type 18B, but he has some very good upgrades and deserves a fair shot at qualifying. If the horse fails then let it fail, but it needs a fair chance. I know that there is a plot to stop him from becoming a knight let alone having the opportunity to be a Golden Griffin. Now in the morning I want you to go to Voiland and get ready for the new recruits to get there in a week's time. I will make sure that you are both in the appropriate places and ready to be instructors. Do the best you can to instruct any and all knights that are under your charge. I assure you that this knight will not disappoint you in his lessons. Be prepared, he may very well surprise you with his skill with the sword. Jaymmol, I know you are one of the very best swordsmen in the kingdom. Let him demonstrate to you and you will know whether I am speaking the truth or not. Hollen, do your best to assist and be watchful for any that will try to undermine what you have been tasked to do.”

“Yes sir,” they replied as the full impact of what they had just heard fell on them.

“Very well, I trust you will do as I ask, this is not an order, just a pleasant request for one who wants this knight to have fair opportunity. Thank you,” the man said and then the screen went blank.

“Well that was interesting,” Hollen said, addressing his friend.

“Yeah, and most intriguing, do you realize who just asked us to do this.”

“Yes, I think I know exactly who that was, and I’m not stupid to say the name aloud. Just imagine being asked this by him.”

They sat back and talked long into the night. They knew what they should do and they began to plan what they should do and what to say. They had been friends for half their lives and knew that they could count on each other to watch out for each other and this knight and they also knew that there was a second instruction that was subtly suggested. Watch out for who might stop this knight and stop them. This may ruffle feathers, however, given who had asked them to do this they knew they had all the power and authority they needed to do the job. Well let’s see who this young knight is.

Chapter 8

Aboard the Royal Express

It was starting to get late in the afternoon when the Sondersons arrived home. It had been a bittersweet day from the start. Breakfast had been another feast at the Markem’s farm. Then many hugs, tears and good wishes. Finally Trance and Kyle mounted their horses and Evan and Eileen along with Heather and Sammy climbed in the carriage and they headed back. Trance had many special memories floating through his mind as he rode this time.

That night after dinner and Kyle returning to his post, Trance lay in bed and dreamed of what was ahead of him. This was his last week before going to knight training. His dreams were evenly divided; in most of them he was reunited with his friends from school and the friends he made at the knight competitions. However, he was torn that night, in some he was having fun and having the same success he enjoyed in school, and then there were dreams that he was being stymied and Odin did not even pass the trial. He would have to get a new warhorse. That hurt him beyond anything. Also there was a training Sergeant that did not like him and kept him back and he was not even able to be a Golden Griffin. The seesaw tilted the other way and he was successful again. He lost track of these events and tossed again in bed.

Time seemed to pass in different ways for Trance that week. One day seemed to drag on and on and the next seemed to fly by and Trance was not sure if he wanted the week to last and then he was really looking forward to his training and what it might bring. Each day came and went whether slow or fast and all too soon it was Ottuthday, the equivalent of Friday.

Trance was awake and excited and nervous. His bag was packed with the clothes that he needed and his surcoat, dagger, and bow. He was nervous enough that he was not very hungry and he had gone to the bathroom three times. A few minutes later he made his way to the garage and loaded his bag in the Victorine and checked on Odin. His family would ride in the carriage and he would ride Odin to the mule-train station. There Odin would be loaded in a special railcar with other robot horses while the Sonderson’s would board and ride in a family car and ride the two hundred and thirty miles to the southeast of Caldora. Trance’s family would park their carriage at the station and rent a carriage to take him the rest of the way to the camp.

Back inside the house Trance went back to his room and made sure everything was in its place. Would he see it again? He thought he would, or rather hoped he would. Then what would happen when he completed his training and went on his first mission? He walked over to his bookshelf and looked over his collection. He had worked out a deal with his mother that he would take a couple books with him and when he read them he would send her them with the ones he wanted next and she would send them to him. A small shadow appeared behind him and he turned to see Sammy standing behind him dressed and ready to go.

“Hey Trance, while you're gone could I play with your Quar Knight action figures?” Sammy asked shyly.

Trance smiled at him and looked back at the bookcase where his figures were on display and reached over and picked up the commander figure and acted like he was examining it carefully before presenting it to Sammy. “Here, while I am away you have command of my figures.”

Sammy’s eyes opened wide as he accepted the gallant looking figure and saluted Trance. “I will lead this division carefully while you are away. Thanks Trance.” He turned and carefully carried the figure to his room.

Trance smiled to himself and looked back at the remaining toys. He knew Sammy would take care of them. They had enjoyed many days last year playing with them and making up adventures. Now he headed to sit and wait in the living room for the rest of the family. It seemed to take forever, however, only twenty minutes went by before everyone was ready and all of their bags were loaded in the Victorine and the Sondersons were ready to go.

In minutes they were on the road and riding through Shandac and then Caldora and Trance kept looking around the capital city and treasured every moment and sight that he saw. There was the theatre that Corena had taken him to for one of their first dates. Then he spotted one of the many museums in town where he had visited several times for school. The zoo could be seen in the distance, and soon he could see the castle royal. Was Corena still there or had the royal family already left to take her to Voiland. That was one thing he could look forward to later today. For now he tried to find something else to take his mind away as he carefully rode Odin down the streets and avenues on the way to the station.

Near the center of the city sat the Regal Kingdom Mule Rail Station. As Trance pulled up with Odin next to his parents parking the carriage, he spotted a mule train pull away from the station. He stood fascinated as the two-dozen immensely large and powerful robot mules pulled the long row of a variety of railcars. His family joined him and he was comforted when his mother put her arms around him. Soon they were making their way to the station and to get Odin checked in so a porter could guide him to the car for the robot horses. Inside the station the family had their tickets checked and then they made their way to their railcar. Trance had an almost eerie sensation as he got to the steps to get into the railcar. He paused for a moment with a flurry of memories and thoughts flashed through his mind. Moments later he was stunned and excited as he stepped into the car and found his family in what must have been a luxury car.

“Are we in the right place,” Eileen said as she looked down at her ticket and looked around at the luxurious railcar that seemed all for them.

“I don’t know,” Evan replied. He stood still and looked around before taking a step to go talk to the conductor.

“I think you will find that you are in the right car,” said an authoritative voice from the far entrance to the car and a moment later King Maximus and Queen Kayna followed by Corena, Prince Mixim and the escort of Golden Griffins led by Major Marlett. “Did we surprise you?” asked Maximus.

“Yes you did,” said Evan as he dipped in a clumsy bow. With a motion from the king he stepped forward and clasped the king’s hand. “This is almost too much. I bought our tickets a couple weeks ago.”

“I know. I have my sources at the palace and I made a couple calls. Your family has been very important to us,” Maximus said as he directed his gaze between Trance and Corena.

“Your highness, this is so unexpected. I don’t know what to say,” Eileen added and bowed to the king and queen.

“Oh Eileen, I don’t think you need to bow to us anymore, at least when we are meeting in a place like this. How have you been doing,” Kayna said as she stepped forward and embraced her friend. “I want you to know that we consider you as family,” Kayna almost whispered to Eileen and she swiveled her eyes conspiratorially toward Trance and Corena, “If they continue, well we will be family,” and she embraced Eileen a second time.

Mixim for his part headed to a chair and sat and looked bored as he looked around. Soon he spotted Sammy and nodded his head in a way to call him over and soon the two boys were sitting together and talking. Soon they had one of the vid screens occupied with a new vid game.

Trance walked forward and it seemed to take hours for him to greet and talk to all of his friends in the Golden Griffins. All of them were in comfortable uniforms. Of his closest friends in this division was Major Marlett who was partly responsible for Trance having Odin. Then there was Zak Karry, Gracer’s older brother, and Bear, a huge muscled man. There were a few others that Trance had met last year when he first met them and Corena. Finally there she was before him.

As always, Corena was dressed in a comfortable and flattering way. She stepped gracefully up and gently put her arms around Trance. “I’m so glad you are here. Are you surprised? Now we can head to the camp together. I could not wait to see you today and did not want to wait till we got to the camp before seeing you.”

It took Trance a few moments to find his voice, “I wondered when we rode up and passed by the castle royal if you were there or if you and your family had taken some special way to get across the country.”

“Well this is a special way to travel across the kingdom. This is the royal car by the way. Dad had it set up on the outside so it would look like a normal rail car so nobody would know it was us in transit,” said Corena as she looked around the car.

Wow, thought Trance. He looked around also and felt more confident about his day. Now he could just relax and talk to Corena and his friends. This was better than he could have planned. He pulled her in to embrace her and quickly kissed her before directing her to a seat where they were joined by Marlett, Zak, and Bear.

Everyone sat and relaxed and the division of Golden Griffins divided with a third going to the railcar just forward of the royal car and another third going to the following railcar. Marlett and the final third took up comfortable places for the train ride. Trance was deep in conversation with Marlett about what to expect at training when the signal came and suddenly the car started to rock as the robot mules began to move forward and slowly took up the slack between all of the railcars and began pulling them forward down the tracks. Gradually the train picked up speed and the mules made their way to a full gallop. Trance took a moment to look out the window behind him and was amazed at how fast the train seemed to be moving and speeding out of the city. Soon the train was out of the capital and zooming out to the country.

“I have put a word in and I think you should get one of the better training divisions,” Marlett said as he got Trance’s attention again.

“Thank you,” Trance responded. “I have dreamed of this and here it is. I don’t know if I’m ready or not.”

“Oh you’re ready. Your performance in the end of year tournaments made you ready, and as my mother has told me a number of times, ‘When you question the fact of whether you are ready or not means that you are ready,’” Corena said.

Marlett added, “Corena is right. From what I saw at the tournaments you are ready. Just keep to your studies and concentrate on your weapon and tactical skills and you’ll do just fine. You are an excellent swordsman and you are quite handy with almost every weapon. How is your archery coming along?”

“I am getting better. When I was at the Markem’s, I finally started to score seventy-five. I will concentrate and do my best. I am getting better each time I practice so hopefully when it is time I will let my arrows go and take the judgment from where they land.”

From the corner talking to Evan Sonderson, King Maximus glanced over and saw Corena and Marlett talking to Trance. He liked Trance, what a fine Golden Griffin he will make, and a good son in-law some day. Will he be king some day? He did not know. Suddenly another thought crossed his mind. What about Corena? Will she be a great queen? And what is Axlor up to. There are reports coming in of Boulthorian ships performing war games while there has been an increase in Boulthorian raids. What are you planning, and when will you make your big move? He looked up at Evan and smiled and continued his pleasant conversation as these thoughts continued to float through.

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Six railcars back another conversation was being held. This time it was Rex with his family, Gerrant his father, Joreen his mother, his two sisters Quorin and Deareath. Rex sat back holding a goblet of wine. Gerrant had insisted that he have his first wine on this trip and he sat with a larger goblet and slouched back and the expression on his face was expectant. A moment later the car’s door opened and a figure wrapped in a dark green almost black cloak stepped in.

“General, Rex, how are you?” greeted the figure in a mild male voice. “I am here at your summons. What would you like to know?” he moved to an empty chair and sat down.

Gerrant took another sip of his wine and looked at the figure critically before speaking. “Your prey seemed to escape you. Twice I heard. That must be very embarrassing to someone with your talent.”

The figure sat back inclined his head. “Yes, it was slightly embarrassing. The first shot was just for fun. The second shot, now that was a shot and I could have gotten two with that arrow. Now I have something special planned for the next shot. I may miss again, but I will keep trying and keeping my prey off balance till I am ready to place a special arrow through the heart.”

“My father paid to have you put an arrow in that heart, you need to put it there,” Rex said imperiously.

The figure turned to Rex and in a relaxed voice responded, “That is true my friend. I did what you wanted at the tournaments and made sure of some of his standings. Your father did not pay for exactly when the arrow will hit its mark. That is to my discretion. Now I think the train is getting up to speed and we have miles to go to get to our training. I think we should relax and enjoy this ride. I always shoot better after a good drink and a long rest.”

Rex glowered and took another sip of his wine. The taste did not quite sit with him but he saw his father take a long sip. The figure had stood and poured a generous amount in a goblet and took a long pull. Rex looked at the blood red liquid and took another sip. Not bad, the taste was starting to grow on him and he was starting to feel a flush to his face. Interesting, maybe he could have some more before he got to the Forge at Voilend.

Gerrant watched his son and immediately spotted his flushed face. He smiled inside and he sat back to take another drink himself. Excellent, in just a short time the pest will be gone and things can get back to the way they were and our plans can move forward. Nice, your path to the throne is being cleared. In one last pull he drained his goblet and stood to get more wine.

Chapter 9

Trance’s Trial

The robot mules pulled the Royal Express swiftly down the tracks, their mechanized legs running in perfect rhythm as they surged across the kingdom. Trance and Corena had sat and visited with all of the occupants of the royal car before they had a scrumptious lunch. Trance was sitting back with his eyes closed and listened as the rail car swayed. He opened his eyes for a moment before they shut again and he took a deep breath. With another deep breath he could not stop the snore that escaped.

He was leading a group of knights in an exercise and they encountered another group of knights. They were like his own with similar armor so he knew they were not Boulthorian knights with all of their angular plate armor. They had the more rounded and formed armor and mail of Althora, mainly the armor of the kingdom of Cator. This must be a training competition because both sides engaged in a furious skirmish. Trance swung his sword and strove forth against one opponent after another. Suddenly it seemed that the other side kept gaining men. It was like a hydra, he would defeat one knight and two or three others took their place. Suddenly he was opposite a knight he was very familiar with, Rex seemed larger and more menacing than before and they clashed swords. Both were very skilled swordsmen and knew each other quite well. Suddenly the scene seemed to change, or maybe it had not and they continued their duel when Trance felt a sharp blow to his side.

His eyes bolted open and he saw Corena looking down at him. “Hey sleepy, we’re almost there. Time for us to get ready, you don’t want to get there and nearly fall asleep on the first day. We’ll be exhausted by tonight anyway.”

Trance sat up and stretched before standing. As he stood he felt his side and the slight soreness from where Corena had poked him. He stretched again and looked out the window and saw another city flashing by. “How soon will we get there?”

“We are about forty minutes out,” Marlett said as he strode over.

“Come on Trance, time to get ready,” Eileen said as she walked over and tried to smooth out his hair.

Corena stepped aside as Trance’s mother came up and did her best to get his hair in order and then straightened his shirt. “Now you look better for your first day,” she said as she stepped back.

King Maximus came over and looked at Trance critically and nodded. “Yeah, I think he looks all right for the first time at training. In fact he looks like a Golden Griffin to me. What do you think Marlett?”

Marlett approached his king and looked as Trance tried to stand as straight and tall as possible while his knees shook slightly. Then his attitude seemed to change and he walked up and really looked Trance up and down. “I don’t know your Highness. He isn’t standing as straight as a Golden Griffin. Check your posture, head up, and look straight ahead. Now I see it. You know I think he might make a Golden Griffin. I know he has some raw skill. Let’s see if the Forge and GrindStone can refine him and make him the Griffin we know he can be.”

Evan came over and wryly smiled at his son. “You know, I think you're right. How do you feel Trance? Do you think you’ll make it as a Golden Griffin.”

“Yeah dad, I know I can. I will do the best I can to learn and train to be a Golden Griffin,” Trance said as continued to stand straight.

Marlett stood straight and crossed his arms before relaxing his stance and said, “Relax Trance you’ll do fine just like I kept telling you. I have no doubt you’ll be one of the finest Golden Griffins.”

In a way time ticked by faster than normal to Trance and in another way it seemed to slow down. Finally he felt the train slowing down as they were approaching their destination. Trance looked out and Corena stepped up to his side and pointed out some landmarks and sites that she knew. Minutes later the train was slowing down further as they were approaching the station at Voilend. The station came into view and the robot mules continued to bring the train to a slow and gentle stop. Moments later Marlett gathered his division of Golden Griffins and they formed up and made an escort for the royal family to disembark followed by the Sondersons.

Trance noticed all the looks they got as some of the Griffins gathered up their bags and led the way through the station. Minutes later Marlett and his Golden Griffins were mounted on their warhorses, Trance was astride Odin, the royal family was in a royal coach and his family was in a rented carriage. As Trance rode along he noticed that Corena’s war horse Kishara walked just behind the royal coach. Hum, he thought, Kishara looks slightly different and he could not tell exactly how.

The gate at the base was guarded as they approached. Trance remembered seeing military bases in his youth on Earth. This seemed just like them. The fence around the base was made of mesh wire at least ten feet high and he noticed four knights at the gate checking credentials and as he looked there was a tower twenty yards to the right side of the gate and another tower to the left. Each tower had four archers that he could see. Moments later the Golden Griffins and the royal coach were approved to enter the base and his family was now having their credentials checked and a knight approached him for his.

“I need your identification and papers,” the knight said in a forced polite voice.

Trance handed over his identification and papers for enlistment. The knight barely looked at them and looked up and in a snide voice said, “Your enlistment papers aren’t complete. I don’t think you’ll be able to enter the base till you have them all.”

Trance looked confused and looked at them. He knew he had kept all of them together since getting them in the post. “Sir, I think if you look I’m sure that I have all of the papers there. That is all of them that I received.”

“Well, I did look at them and they are not all here. I’m afraid you will not be admitted without them.”

This was a strange Trance thought. “Look, I am with the royal family and my training starts today. Please take a look at the papers. Which one am I missing.”

“Oh yeah, and I’m the royal suitor. You are missing vital statistics and they are not here, without them you can not enter this base.”

“Which papers exactly are he missing,” said a voice behind the knight.

The knight turned to face Major Marlett mounted on his warhorse. Instantly the knight’s face changed and he saluted and stuttered his reply, “I was just checking and he is missing a statistics page.”

“As I asked, exactly which page is he missing, show me,” Marlett said and reached his hand out to get the papers from the knight.

Hesitantly the knight handed the papers over and tried to show the missing page. Marlett snatched the papers from the knight and looked through them and nodded his head and a slight grin appeared on his lips. He looked the knight in the face before addressing him, “I just looked them over and I don’t see any missing pages. They are all here and I think he can pass.”

“Sir if you look you will see that there is a missing page,” the knight’s voice wavered.

“Well I say they are complete and his highness is waiting for this young man to pass through the gate,” Marlett said as he pointed toward the royal coach. The knight followed Marlett’s direction and stood frozen in place as he saw King Maximus standing outside the royal coach looking on with a curious expression on his face.

“I’m sorry sir, I must have made a mistake,” he reluctantly acknowledged, “He may pass.”

“Good,” Marlett said and guided his horse over to Trance and handed him his papers back. “Follow me,” he instructed and Trance rode right behind Marlett through the gate. Trance did not miss many looks from the knights in the guardhouse and the towers. In fact he was certain that one of the archers was putting an arrow in his quiver.

Minutes later Trance followed Marlett and the royal entourage to the check in lines. There were twenty desks set up with a knight in duty uniforms sitting at them checking in all of the potential knights onto the base. Trance had left Odin at the stables to be checked in later and continued to follow the royal party with his family. Corena took a place in line toward one of the desks where a lady knight was sitting and checking young ladies. Trance took the line for young men next to her and waited as one by one the boys were checked in. He tried to wait patiently and looked around and pleasantly chatted with Corena as they moved closer to the desks. As he looked he spotted a few of his friends and waved at a few of them. Three desks down already at a desk was Hamon, his friend the captain of the Armorite knights, and over at the next desk was Lamden the captain of the Black Knights, school teams that he had competed against. Then he spotted his friends Gracer, Zam, and Mandor all showing up about the same time behind him along with many of his other friends.

Now he saw some other boys he knew well for other reasons and chief among them seemed to gather quite a gathering was Rex. He was hard to miss, at six foot two inches with golden blonde hair and a very handsome face. Yet Trance knew that the face hid a hard cheating heart. Trance groaned slightly as Rex still had many admirers. Some boys even made room for him to move up. Trance watched with almost jealousy as the knight at the desk stood and warmly greeted Rex and in moments checked him in and he passed through where some of Rex’s friends surrounded him. For a moment Rex looked back and Trance felt the malevolence from this distance and something more. It seemed Rex had almost a gloating look in his eye.

Trance tried not to worry much about that. With how large the base was and the sheer number of new recruits they would probably be in different outfits. There were three boys in front of him in line and Corena had two girls in front of her. In just a few minutes Trance proudly watched Corena hand over her enlistment paperwork and the lady knight tapped on keys on her computer terminal and brought Corena up on screen and asked a few questions and entered the answers and moments later Corena was allowed through to a gathering of their friends.

Trance smiled and could not wait to join them and move forward when he got up to the knight at the desk. Somehow the hair at the back of his neck stood up as the knight looked up at him and his forced smile seemed oddly familiar.

“May I have your enlistment papers please,” the knight asked and reached for them.

Trance handed them over and out of the corner of his eye he spotted two important looking knights in duty uniform looking on. One was a dark copper and the other was lightly tanned with chestnut hair, both seemed about Trance's height, maybe five foot eleven or right at six feet. Trance looked back down as the knight hit a few keys and looked up and said, “I don’t know how this happened but you are not in the system.”

It took Trance a moment to process what the knight had said and he looked at the screen curious. “What, I must be in there. I submitted all of my paperwork and I have the confirmation on my enlistment papers.”

“Well I don’t know what to tell you, but I am not finding you in the system. I looked under your name and by the confirmation and you are not here,” the knight said as he hit a couple keys and as he did Trance could swear he saw his name pop up.

“Could you check again for me please,” Trance asked as he watched the knight more closely. This time he was sure the knight was intentionally going past his name. “One more time please and more slowly I think you are skipping over my name.”

The knight looked up at him and the look was not friendly. “Are you accusing me of something?”

Trance stood his ground and replied, “Sir, I think you are skipping over my name. Please check again and scroll more slowly.” He watched carefully and caught the knight hitting the key twice to skip over his name again, but before he could ask the knight to scroll one hit at a time when the two knights he had seen were suddenly behind the desk.

“Sir, what seems to be the issue here,” asked the copper toned knight wearing a silver surcoat with a bronze upper wilderness wolf embroidered on it. This close and Trance could now clearly see the knights badge and was surprised that he was a captain

“Sir, the issue is that this boy is not in the system,” he said confidently.

“Hum, well may I check,” said the coppery knight.

The knight at the desk stopped and looked at him in surprise. “Uh, sir, I have checked multiple times and I tell you he is not in the system.”

“Excuse me sirs, but I think he has been hitting two keys and skipping past me,” Trance said boldly and both knights looked up at him. The desk knight looked defiantly the other looking surprised and they looked at him and then at the computer screen.

The captain reached down and clicked the arrow key once and there it was, Trances name and registration information. The knight’s eyes narrowed as he looked at the knight behind the desk and said in a determined calm voice, “I think I just found his registration information. You may now process him and send him on.” He stood to his full height and turned and walked away with his companion.

The desk knight sat there slightly stunned and in a mode of not knowing what to do next. Almost another moment passed and he had to do his job and in a quick efficient fashion compared Trance’s documents and completed his registration and directed Trance to the next station, a fair sized two story building about one hundred yards away.

Trance walked over and was again in a line waiting to enter the building. He took a few minutes to look around and noticed the sign on the building, Base Supply and Armorers. Ah, thought Trance as he watched young men and women enter the building and in a few minutes exited with a duffel bag. His attention was broken by the sound of laughter off to his left and he looked to see what was going on. He wasn’t certain, but he was almost sure that there were some of Rex’s friends in the area. That was fine, he thought, let them laugh and see how long they last. He looked back in time to see Corena exit the Supply with a couple other girls, all of them carrying duffels. To his delight Corena stopped and looked his way and made a couple hand motions before moving on with her friends.

“I’ll see you in a few minutes,” Corena’s hand motions had meant. Trance smiled as he processed what she said and stepped up. Off to the side he noticed one of the two knights he had seen earlier.

This knight just seemed to be standing around observing everyone around; however, Trance could not shake the feeling that he was being watched. The one knight had shown up to help him, why, and why was this knight here. Oh well, just keep moving and follow orders. Another moment and he was two people back from the door. Patiently he waited as one and then the other boy entered the building. He was next and finally entered.

Now inside he was stunned to see that he was in a spacious entry area where young men and women were in thirty lines of thirty. At the head of each line were a group of three knights, a mix of men and women that took either a young man or woman to a room. Two of the knights held a small electronic box with two emitters that Trance recognized as an electron tape used to accurately measure almost everything. As before Trance moved slowly up his line and was finally at the head where a swarthy looking knight with an electron tape turned and left the line he was at and took his two companions with him and approached him. Trance could not help but notice that the two with electron tapes had tapped them a couple times.

“Follor, you can step aside. I will take this one, you can take that boy there,” said the swarthy looking knight.

“Yes Brakken,” the young knight said as he stepped aside.

“Now will you follow us,” Brakken said as he turned to lead Trance to a nearby room.

Suddenly another voice rang out. “Brakken, I will take that young man.”

Brakken stopped in surprise and turned in shock to an elderly knight that had an aged tan tape draped around his neck and two young assistants with comp pads. “I have been waiting for him. You may take the next young man.”

“Colonel Velters, I think I have this one,” Brakken said as he again tried to lead him to the room.

“Actually no Brakken, I am going to take this one. Maybe I was not clear. I have been waiting for this young man and I will measure him. You have that young man, now,” Velters said more forcefully and stepped forward in a way that said he would not be denied.

“Very well, you, come this way,” Brakken said grudgingly and motioned for the boy behind Trance. As he led the way Brakken and his partner with the electron tape tapped their devices again.

“I hate those things,” Velters said as he led Trance to a nearby room. “They constantly need to be calibrated. Now this,” he said as he gave a slight tug on the tape around his neck. “It has never failed me. Now let’s get you measured for your uniforms.”

In moments Velters had Trance in the private room and stripped down to just his under clothes and he took the tape and in quick exact motions used the tape to measure Trance around his wrist, arms, chest, shoulders, ankles, legs, and inseam. Somehow the elderly man made Trance comfortable as he took the measurements and rattled them off to the two assistants. “Now let me see. Ah, this is unusual. It seems that your order of armor and arms will come from the Royal Hephistine Armorers.”

“Why is that so unusual,” Trance asked curiously.

“Why, that is because most knights and Golden Griffins get their armor and arms, especially their first, from the Chrimite Anvil Smiths and Armorers. There are only two other people I know of getting their armor from Hephistine. Of course Princess Corena, and then there is Rex Absolethane.”

Trance took a moment to process Velters comment before he asked a question that popped in his mind, “Did you measure Rex?”

Velters took the question in stride, “No, actually Brakken measured Rex. I was asked to come and measure Corena and you for your armor. I was rather curious why I was asked to measure you.”

Trance was taken by surprise. “Who asked you to measure me?”

“That is none of your concern. You just need to know that you have been properly measured for your uniforms and armor. Now let’s take a look at what kind of armor you want. As a Golden Griffin you are able to select your armor,” Velters said as he took the comp pad from one of his assistants, a young woman with bright red hair.

“Well, I’m not a Golden Griffin yet,” Trance replied.

“That is very true; however, from what I heard through the tubes is that you are a very gifted knight. I have no doubt that you will make a great Golden Griffin. Now here are the types of armor you can choose from. How about this,” Velters said, showing Trance an image of a Golden Griffin in heavy and elaborate armor. “I think if I saw it right Rex selected something like this.”

Trance shook his head. The armor looked too heavy and the elaborate filigree on the armor was just not his style. Velters showed another set, still fairly elaborate, not nearly as heavy. Trance again shook his head. Velters went through five more sets when Trance spotted a set that seemed to fit. Velters stopped and looked at Trance in surprise and looked down at the armor. It was a set that was made of bi-forged rings and armor. Both the mail layer and armor was made of quarvalian and telvian forged together. Lighter than most riding armor for a knight and also slightly heavier than the flight armor of a knight that rode on the winged robot horses, also Trance appreciated its simplicity. He would let his actions show rather than his armor.

“Huh, are you sure you want this armor,” Velters said.

“Yes, that is what I want. I think it will work perfectly for me,” Trance said positively.

“All right,” Velters said and in a few keystrokes sent the order in. Then after entering a few more keys he printed a document out of a sleek printer in the corner of the room and handed the paper to Trance. “Now take this down the hall and hand this to Kalenda. No one else, make sure it is Kalenda that you hand it to and she will get your first uniforms that will get you through the first couple weeks before your regular uniforms arrive. Also your armor will arrive a month from now,” said Velters.

“Yes sir, thank you,” Trance said. Velters waved a hand at him and he knew he had been dismissed. Trance opened the door and headed out. Minutes later he found Kalenda, a cute little lady that oddly reminded him of Corena, and handed her the print out and in a few moments walked out with his own duffel with his uniforms.

Velters had watched Trance exit the room and then looked down at the comp pad that his assistant handed him. He found himself intrigued by this young man. Trance was certainly different than most young men he had measured before. The message that he had received last night had certainly made him curious, and now that he had met the young man he had a good reason why. Now as he looked at the pad he just had one more function to perform. He tapped a couple keys and the information went from bi-forged to tri-forged.

Before Trance left the building he was assigned a comp pad that was set up with all of his personal information and schedule. He took a moment to glance at it and saw that his next destination was the Armory where he would get his bow that he had ordered. Once outside he was among hundreds of young men and women heading in various directions. Trance consulted the pad and saw he needed to head to the left and walk nearly seventy yards to the Armory.

As he approached he could see this must be one of the older structures here. It resembled a small castle with two towers and a massive heavy door that at present was open. Again in line he waited his turn to go in. At least here there were not as many people waiting in line. Like fate Trance spotted Corena in the ladies line, somehow just three people ahead of him.

“Hi Princess, don’t you have your bow already,” Trance asked.

“No, I had to have it redone so I have to pick it up here like everyone else,” Corena replied sweetly.

With no trouble at all, Trance remembered Corena’s bow. It was an off-white color and was a re-curved cupid’s bow. He also knew that as sweet as Corena was to him and their friends, she was one of the most dangerous and deadly archers he had seen. It was slightly hard to imagine that Corena’s bow needed to be redone.

“What did you need to have done to your bow? Did something happen to it over the summer?” Trance asked.

“No, it just needed to be oiled and sanded and a new bowstring. It also needed to be tested to make sure it was battle ready,” Corena replied.

“That’s cool. I would have thought that it was already for you.”

“Even though I am the Princess, I still need to follow the rules. Also this lets me know that there is nothing wrong with my bow.”

“How could anything be wrong with your bow?” Trance asked.

“You never know. It may have stress in places that may weaken the bow in time, and it did need a new bowstring,” Corena replied.

They moved up and Corena was greeted warmly by one of the clerks and moments later she had her magnificent bow in her hands. “I’ll wait for you outside,” she said as she reached out to touch his hand for a moment.

Heat shot up Trance’s arm from Corena’s touch and seemed to go straight to his heart and face. It was his turn and he was slightly surprised that the clerk in front of him wore a disapproving look.

“Your name please,” the clerk asked in a brusque voice.

“Terrance Sonderson, but most everyone calls me Trance,” he replied as pleasantly as possible.

“Let me go check,” the clerk said as stepped back and started checking out the racks of bows. A few minutes later he returned, “I’m afraid I don’t have a bow for you.”

Trance again had a strange feeling. “Could you check again for me? I have my confirmation that the bow was ordered and it says it is here,” he said as he tried to show the comp pad with the information to the clerk.

“I’m sorry, but there must be a mistake. I did not see a bow listed for you. I will check again if you wish, but if I did not find it the first time, it is probably not here.” He turned and it was obvious that he only half-heartedly looked the bows over.

Trance watched him carefully and felt his frustration rise as the clerk barely looked at the name tags attached to the bows. Then he spotted what had to be his bow. “Sir, I think that one has to be my bow,” he said and pointed directly at the laminated re-curved bow.

The clerk turned and tried his best to look past the bow. Before he could deny the bow again another voice spoke up. “Is there a problem here.”

Both Trance and the clerk looked to see who had spoken and there was the knight Trance had seen earlier. “Lieutenant Marsh, it is good to see you again. I was just telling this recruit that I could not find his bow. I don’t think that it is here.”

“Huh. I think that he just asked you to check that bow out. Is that his bow?” the lieutenant asked.

The clerk blushed and tried to straighten up to reply, “I already checked that bow out and it is not his bow.”

“Well could you check it again for me? Humor us for a moment, if it really isn’t here then he’ll have to resubmit his order.”

The clerk gave a short laugh and turned and tried hard not to grab the ID card and instead grabbed the card from the bow next to it. “See, this bow is for a…”

Trance interrupted, “I think you have the card for the bow next to it.”

“No I don’t. This is the right tag.”

“Excuse me sir, but I think that you are looking at the wrong tag,” Trance insisted.

Before the clerk could respond again, the lieutenant headed around the counter and lifted the bow and clearly the tag hung from the bow. “I think the recruit is right. Your name is Terrance, oh, Trance isn’t it.” He looked at the tag and read the name aloud. “Terrance Sonderson, I think this is your bow.” With a courteous gesture he handed the bow over to Trance.

“Thank you,” Trance said as he took the bow and turned to head out the door. Outside he finds not only Corena, but also his family pleasantly talking to the royal family and a number of his friends. As a group they start towards the barracks. Trance quickly discovers that he will share the barracks with his friends Hamon, Gracer, Mandor, Zam, Lamden, and Orazior. To his delight Corena is in the barracks next door to him and many of her friends and teammates were with her. Unfortunately, he saw that he also shared the barracks with Rex and quite a few of his friends.

At the barracks door the training sergeant met them all. “Good day boys. I am your trainer, Sergeant Frane. You will address me and either Sir, Sarge, or Sergeant Frane. Now I want you to kiss your families’ good-bye for a few moments as you go in and leave your stuff at bed. Pick your bed carefully, this is where you live and breathe now. You have ten minutes to go get your bed and meet me out here. Your next destination is at the stables. Those of you that have brought horses will find them there and they will be tested next.”

Trance responded with the rest of the boys and was near the door so he could enter first when Frane put a hand out and instead of Trance leading the way, he had to wait for Rex and his friends to enter first. What was going on today? He kept finding people that were against him for some reason. In minutes though he was able to enter the large barracks room and found a bed among his friends and farther away from Rex who had the room nearest to Frane’s room. He did not take a lot of time. Trance left his stuff at the foot of the bed and headed back out. Hopefully things would be easier when he got to the stable so he could show what Odin could do.

Chapter 10

Odin’s Trial

Frane directed the families of the recruits to the stands around a vast field. It reminded Trance of the field for the end of year tournaments on Caldar. Trance walked with his friends and noticed that Rex and his friends were up near Frane. That was okay, Trance thought; sooner or later Rex would show his true character.

Trance could not help looking around as he approached the field. There were hundreds of young men and women with their barracks groups out to have their horses inspected. By his best guess half the population of recruits was there to train to be knights and of those a third were pursuing being Golden Griffins. Also it seemed that about less than a third of those there training to be a knight or Golden Griffin had horses that needed to be inspected.

The stables, Trance noticed, were about thirty yards away from the field, and as he watched stable hands were leading out all of the horses that needed to be inspected. “As we checked in and were assigned our barracks, our horses were taken and stabled together,” Hamon told Trance. “Our horses will be in the same place the whole time we are training.”

“Settle down,” Frane said in a commanding voice. “I will call your name one at a time in alphabetical order. You will bring your horse and we will examine and have you run it through a couple trials. First we will examine its appearance and how well you worked on it. Next, you will ride your horse around the track and it has to beat a time of ten minutes. If your horse cannot make that time it flunks and you’ll need to get a new horse. Then you will have to demonstrate the horse’s accuracy with its crossbow cannons. If you cannot hit all twenty targets fatally in under ninety seconds your horse fails. Lastly if your horse has a special feature like a flight pack you must demonstrate how it flies around aerial targets and you must hit them with the same accuracy as it demonstrated here on the field.”

“Wow,” Trance said as he did a visual comparison of Odin with the other horses. In a strange way he could easily guess who went with each horse.

“First up, Rex Absolethane,” Frane called.

Rex proudly strode up to his beast of a horse, “This is my horse Cousor, and he is a Percor Destrier V.”

“Impressive,” Zam said. “They just came out two months ago. Percor Destriers are premier horses for knights. They are known for how armored they are.”

Trance could see that as he compared Cousor with many of the Muster brand horses that most of the young men had brought. Some of the features of the horse just made it look more menacing and high class than most. There was a chrome grill where the mouth should be and the face definitely had an armored look. Cousor was also a hefty seventeen hands tall and the tilt of his head almost made him look condescending to the other horses around him. Rex expounded on more of the features of his horse, all of which were related to it being a brand new horse. “He is also armed with the most powerful crossbows for any horse currently in use.” With a flick of a switch the bows emerged from the base of the neck just above the front shoulders.

“Wow,” Gracer said. “Those are some bows,” he commented on the deadly powerful looking re-curved bows.

“All right Rex, let us see how Cousor runs on the track. For some fun every horse that runs will have to compete with four of the fastest horses on base. Rex, mount your horse and take him to the starting line there next to your competitors. Watch for the starting flag, and you will have to complete four laps of the track. Good luck,” Frane said and smirked as Rex proudly mounted Cousor and rode him to the starting line. A moment later one of the track attendants waved the starting flag and the five horses took off.

“Rex is running Cousor to fast to start with,” Mandor said. “That will burn out the leg motors. You need to start slow and build to that kind of gallop. I know; I had an uncle that raced horses for a living.”

Trance was fascinated as he watched Rex ride with such ease as he raced the other knights on their horses and in a half lap had passed the other horses and was pulling away from them. By lap two he was easily ahead of the nearest competitor, and he won by nearly three quarters of a full lap on the three-mile track.

“Now that was spectacular. That is an excellent start. I want all of your horses to run that well. You might not win with a margin like that, but I want you to push your horse to the max,” Frane said. “Now Rex let’s see how accurate those guns are.” He directed Rex still on Cousor to another spot on the field and with a wave of the hand another track attendant activated the targets on the field and indicated that he was ready to take readings from them. “When you are ready take your first shot.”

Rex sat forward and concentrated on his target screen that was placed on the back of his horse’s neck. The first bolt was a flash as it streaked from the crossbow cannons and was instantly followed by a flock of deadly bolts all heading for their designated targets.

“Now that was serious shooting. I am double checking the results,” Frane said rather boisterously. He looked at the attendants screen and saw that every target registered as being fatally hit and in record time. “Rex you are making it hard for anyone to follow you with this performance. You have set two course records. I will have to check with my fellow trainers on their recruits, but I have never seen a horse score that high. Now are there any other special features with your horse that you want to mention.”

Rex sat straight in the saddle and patted Cousor’s neck. “Well, not that I know of. He is just about as perfect to ride as any horse.”

“Very well, let’s move on,” Frane said and called on the next recruit.

As the young man put his horse through the same procedure as Cousor, Trance looked around and was pleased to see that it was Corena’s turn for the ladies with the corresponding barracks to his. She smoothly mounted her horse Kishara and rode her to the starting line on a nearby track. Just as Mandor had said she took Kishara a bit slower to start and gradually built her to a speeding gallop. Trance was astounded at how swiftly Corena’s horse made the four laps and easily won her race. Next Corena rode Kishara up to the target range and easily shot down all of the targets, setting records for the ladies.

“Now is there any special feature with your horse that you want to display,” asked the lady trainer.

“Yes there is,” Corena said, and to Trance’s surprise two attendants brought out a sleek flight pack assembly. The streamlined wings and four built in engines looked like it belonged on a regular winged horse. In just a few minutes the flight pack was in place and Corena was back in the saddle and activating the wings. She took Kishara toward the track and started down the straightaway and the engines gave a soft roar of cones of blue flame and lifted off.

Trance proudly watched as Corena flew Kishara with ease and in precise manner took out the aerial targets. He looked at Odin and gave a nervous smile. All of his hard work was soon to be evaluated and he felt his nerves. Half his brain knew everything was going to be fine. However, he had just seen two horses fail. One did not match the speed and time on the track, and the other was way off on its targeting. Hamon was called and Trance crossed his fingers for his friend.

Hamon’s horse looked very solid and formidable, could it make the speed that was needed. On the track with the other horses it proved to have the necessary speed, even though it did not win, it achieved a reasonable speed and time. Accuracy was not a problem either, Hamon took his time and every shot was spot on. Mandor and Gracer’s horses also qualified. Zam would have to wait till nearly last. Trance celebrated with each of his friends as their horses performed well. Four more horses failed to qualify, and Trance felt his pulse raging through his veins. “Lord please help me do well,” he prayed quietly.

With a slight smirk to his face Frane called, “Terrance Sonderson, let’s see how your horse does. Bring him forward for the physical exam.”

Trance was not sure how to take this. Just do your best and trust your work. “This is my horse Odin,” he said as he brought Odin forward.

Frane approached, “For starters your horse looks to be in good shape. However, I would like to know about the processing unit. Where did you find a new processor for this horse, I did not think they made them or modern compatible parts.”

“Actually, I took the processor out and replaced it with a hex honeycomb matrix. I also downloaded all of the current strategies. I also took the time to improve his armor and …”

“Interesting. Well let’s move on and have you line up for the speed trial.”

Trance was slightly annoyed. He did not even get to show the crossbow cannons. Well Frane will see them when he takes them to the target range. In a moment he was astride Odin and rode him to the starting line. The knights on their horses eyed him oddly and grinned at each other. There was no real contest, they knew the approximate age of the horse and knew it did not have the speed to challenge them. This lad was going to be disappointed and have to get a new horse. That was for the best. Who would want to ride such an old horse anyway?

Trance patted Odin and whispered, “Let’s surprise them and show them what you can do.”

“Yes master, I will do my best. Let me loose,” Odin replied in an electronic voice.

From the corner of his eye, Trance could see the surprise and curiosity of the knights. He swung his eyes to the attendant with the flag and nearly missed the wave. The other horses bolted hard off the line, that was fine let them see what happens. With controlled deliberation he eased Odin up in speed and felt the full power of the racing horse motors as they raced up to and past the other horses. Trance focused ahead and missed the looks of the knights and he and Odin flew past them. Faster and faster Trance pushed Odin. He had raced him before, but never this fast. He did his best to concentrate on running the race and not think about the speed meter, he could find out how fast they went later. In less time than he thought they were crossing the finish line.

Trance pulled Odin up and could tell that they had definitely made an impression. Surprise, admiration, and frustration crossed Frane’s face. “That was truly unexpected. I never thought a Muster Type 18B could run that fast. You may have to replace the leg motors running that fast for long. How about we see how hot they are,” Frane said as he stepped up and was certainly shocked that the motors were not as hot as he thought they should be. “I don’t understand,” he tried to comment under his breath.

“I updated the motors as well. I used …” Trance started to explain when an attendant interrupted this time.

“Sir, you did not tell him about his time,” the attendant said, trying to get Frane’s attention.

Frane looked furiously at the man and tried to skip the subject but with all of the eyes on him he would have to say something, “Well your horse did accomplish the speed you needed now lets see how accurately he shoots.”

“Uh sir,” said a new voice.

Trance turned to see the knight that had helped him earlier and wondered how long he had been nearby. He was still curious as to who he was and what he was there for.

“Ah, Jaymmol, how are you. I did not know you were here. Just checking on the new recruits,” Frane said, trying hard to sound polite.

“I am here on a special directive, for the commander's eyes only. Now the attendant was saying something about the time for this horse. What was his time,” Jaymmol said politely.

Frane’s fist clenched as he looked at the readout and grudgingly said, “This is extraordinary, I don’t know how, but you set a new track record of seven minutes five seconds. Sorry Rex your time of seven minutes twelve seconds is now the second fastest on record. So, on to the target range.”

Trance could not believe this. He knew he had done well, but that even surprised him. This will be the first real test of Odin’s crossbow cannons. He guided Odin to the firing line and waited for the targets to pop up and the go signal.

Frane stepped up to the control unit for the target range and while everyone focused down the range he reached down and hit a couple keys on the controls. Up popped the targets, mannequins dressed in armor and loaded with electronic readers, only this time there were forty of them and they seemed much further back and farther apart than how they had appeared for previous horses.

Trance was not sure how to take the arrangement of the targets. This was unusual, but he would make the best of this and show what Odin could do. In a couple keystrokes he activated Odin’s crossbows and targeting system. Not very many people initially paid much attention as the bows came out. They all expected the typical mini crossbows, only a few of Trance’s closest friends knew that they were from a much older and larger warhorse. That was only the start of how unusual they were.

Actually there were four crossbows on each side on a square shaft that would rotate around after each shot. The top bows were loaded and ready to shoot. After the shot the shaft would rotate the bow to the outside then after the next shot the shaft rotated again and now the first bow was on the bottom and a hydraulic arm pushed the bowstring into shooting position, another shot and the shaft rotated the bow to be close to the horses body and a bolt was loaded into position from a chain belt, and finally another shot brought the first bow back to shooting position.

Trance had recently made another advance. He had installed a laser targeting system to all eight bows and as he hit a couple control keys just below the target screen. In a moment the laser sights found all of the targets and Trance waited for the signal to shoot.

Frane didn’t even look at the horse’s bows, he knew what he would find, and this would be it for this horse. “Shoot when ready, the system will count your score.”

Trance took a calming breath and fired. A storm of bolts left the bows as they rotated perfectly and every bolt found its mark. A buzzer sounded far earlier than France expected. The sound indicated that every target had been hit. This wasn’t right, there was no way the horse could shoot that fast.

“I think the system made an error,” Frane said to the attendant at the range controls.

“Sir, there is no fault. He hit every target in record time. I double checked the system and the visuals,” the attendant said. “Also somehow sir the range was set at maximum. I don’t know how but he clearly qualified at an expert level.”

“That is not possible. The bows on that horse could not hit that fast, or could have hit that last target,” Frane said not caring who heard as his fists clenched again. He turned and was momentarily stunned as he beheld the bows extended from the horse.

Sitting on Odin Trance heard Frane. Let him gripe, Trance thought, he will soon learn what we can do. Trance could see shock, surprise, admiration, and frustration flash across Frane’s face. He knew he had made a serious impression. With a swift look around he saw that there were a lot of people watching him.

Frane was astonished at the horse’s bows. Of course he recognized the bow system from a much older and heavy warhorse. He easily remembered that the system had issues that caused them to be discontinued. It appeared that this unusual young man had figured out how to eliminate those issues. A closer look even showed him that Trance had made another advancement; he had swapped the regular bows for a mini compound bow. No wonder he had hit that distant target. He had orders to follow and he turned and walked down the row of targets thinking of what he could do. An idea popped in his head and he stepped up to one of the distant targets and started to reach out his hand.

“What are you reaching for,” Jaymmol asked from a few feet away.

Frane mentally cursed and turned to confront this interfering knight. “I was just going to inspect the depth of this bolt. It doesn’t look like it hit deep enough for me to register a fatal shot.”

“Is that all, well allow me,” Jaymmol said and stepped up and carefully grabbed the bolt and marked the spot where the bolt met the surface of the mannequin target and pulled the bolt out. Even to Jaymmol’s surprise the bolt hit and sank deeper than what he expected, definitely a fatal shot. With equal care he stuck the bolt back where it had come from.

Frane swallowed his next comment and nodded his head. Suddenly another thought entered and he decided to act. “Actually, as I look at the range it is not set up right. Someone has activated the range to maximum. This shoot does not count.” With a grim smile he looked at the range attendants. One of them can take the fall.

“Well,” said Jaymmol as he picked up a comp pad and began searching the content. He stopped and held the pad out. “According to rules of the range, when the range is set to a higher standard for a recruit and he hits and meets or beats the range his score is recorded and he passes the course.” Jaymmol held out the pad so Frane could see it.

Frane had a hard time controlling the rage erupting in his veins. Unfortunately, he could not argue with Jaymmol. Very well, let’s see if it succeeds with the special feature. “All right Terrance, does your horse have a special feature we can check out.”

“Yes there is a special feature. I have a flight pack for Odin,” Trance said boldly. From not far away Trance heard Rex and a few of his friends snicker. Okay, wait till they see Odin take to the sky.

Frane felt his face relax into a delighted smile. He knew that these Musters with the flight packs sometimes did not fly very well, especially the older models such as Odin. This is almost too perfect, the horse cannot pass this test. “Interesting, I do remember that this model did have that feature. Now you will have just the straight away from the track to run down and you must be airborne before the last pole marking the far curve. Once you are in the air you must circle that base and then fly through the aerial target range and fatally shoot the targets down. You will be judged on your ability to fly, altitude, areal speed, and areal accuracy.”

Trance nodded his acknowledgement and looked toward the stable. Walking toward him were two knights carrying Odin’s flight pack. One of them Trance recognized as the knight that seemed to be with Jaymmol. As he dismounted two other knights stepped forward and offered to take the flight pack and mount it on Odin.

“No thank you. I think we have this,” said the lieutenant.

“Are you sure Hollen,” said one of the knights in a more determined voice.

“Yeah, I’m sure. Now step aside and let us do our job,” Hollen said as he and the other knight took their burden and with care set the flight pack in place over Odin’s saddle and in quick order had it set up.

Trance mounted Odin again and activated the wings. The seven-foot wings lowered and the powerful fan jet engines kicked in and started powering up. As he guided Odin to the track, he heard Rex and his friends laughing and making bets on whether the horse would lift off the ground. This will surprise them, he thought as he waited for the signal to start. The flag fluttered and he said, “Let’s go,” and he started Odin down the track.

In moments Odin was galloping down the track and Trance was pushing him faster and faster all the time watching how fast he was going and trying to reach the speed that he needed. “Come on just a little more speed.” With every length he was gaining the necessary speed and running out of room. He needed just a little more, and there was the line ahead where he needed Odin in the air or fail. Now, just one stride beyond where Kishara leaped into the air, Odin made a mighty leap and orange dragon fire shot out the jets and powered Odin into the air.

Trance took a deep breath and relaxed slightly as he started flying Odin toward the aerial flight path. Swiftly they gained altitude and Trance flew Odin up and around the base and back to the airborne targets. He focused and turned Odin into an attack position and came at the first target. Odin’s bows spun and bolts flew in deadly lines at the targets. Only four bolts missed their targets as he flew down the range. Of a sudden Odin’s internal guidance system took over momentarily and swerved off course.

Trance pulled Odin back on course and asked the horse, “What happened? Why did you veer off, we were doing so well.”

“Sorry master,” Odin replied in his anxious voice. “I had to dodge an arrow that flew up at us. I had to keep you safe.”

“Arrow, what arrow? I did not see an arrow,” Trance asked his horse.

“There was an arrow master. I saw it. When we land you can review my visual recording and see for yourself,” Odin replied. Trance knew the voice was mechanical and had no emotion; however, he distinctly thought Odin sounded slightly defensive and wanted to prove that he was right.

Trance processed this before responding, “All right, we can review that when we land.” With a firm grip on the reins, Trance flew Odin in a sweep around the track and brought Odin in for a fairly smooth landing. Odin ran as fast as he did just before taking to the air and slowly at first and more rapidly he slowed to a trot.

Frane came over almost gloating. “Well well, that was slightly impressive; however, I must say that your horse failed.”

Trance looked confused. How could he just fail Odin? “How, what did we do to fail? We lifted off before the line and we flew the course and hit all of the targets.”

“Yes, that is all true, but you left the course and swerved out on that last target. That fails you,” Frane said.

“Sir, that was due to the fact that Odin dodged an arrow that flew up at us. He dodged it to protect me,” Trance said defensively.

“What, are you trying to tell me that someone on this base shot an arrow at you,” Frane said dismissively.

“Yes sir, and we can prove it. Odin recorded the arrow as it flew by us. If you come up you can see it on his target screen,” Trance said in the best reasonable voice he could.

“Where did the arrow come from,” said Hollen as he and Jaymmol approached.

“Don’t tell me you believe his story. He is probably making it up to cover his flying mistake,” Frane said.

“There is only one way to know. We review the horses screen,” Jaymmol said and walked closer to Trance and Odin.

Hollen nearly glared at Frane and with a motion of his hand urges Frane forward. Then as they came to a good viewing position Odin played back the moments immediately before and after the arrow. Trance hit a couple buttons and replayed the arrow and zoomed it in so it was very clear to everyone. For him, Trance was stunned and could not get the image of the arrow out of his mind. There was something very familiar about that arrow. It was definitely a deadly war arrow.

“Look at that,” Jaymmol said pointing to a point on the screen, “That area looks familiar. It looks like the arrow came from over at the archery range.”

Hollen turned and ran in that direction and called out to a couple security knights. In moments he was leading six knights into the area around the archery range. Everyone stood and waited as the men swept the area.

Since no one had said anything he stayed seated in the saddle. Jaymmol looked comfortable and confident while Frane was looking impatient. Soon Hollen and the group of security knights were on their way back.

“We didn’t find anyone, …” Hollen said and was interrupted.

“Well now, so now you are saying that the arrow flew up on its own,” Frane said.

“No sir, I am saying that we did not find anyone there, yet there is definitely evidence that I recorded that proves that there was someone there. He must have fired the arrow and fled the scene. I saw very faint tracks leading up to a tree where he stood out of sight and fired the arrow and then he swiftly and carefully left the area,” Hollen said, trying hard not to lose patience.

“What is this about an arrow being shot at this recruit,” said a very firm authoritative voice.

Trance turned and saw an older distinguished knight. He looked for the knight’s badge and was taken by surprise. He sat at attention and waited for the knight to speak again.

“This recruit is trying to say that his horse veered off course and failed to qualify because an arrow flew up on its own,” Frane said.

“Sir,” Jaymmol said as he saluted the knight, “We have clearly seen the recording from this recruits horse, and it is very clear that an arrow did fly up at him. Hollen here has investigated the scene and he says that there is evidence of an archer standing by a tree over by the archery range.”

“Is this true Lieutenant Hollen?” the knight asked, turning to Hollen.

“Yes sir,” Hollen replied, “I have the vid recording of the scene.” He held up the pad and the knight watched the pad for a couple minutes.

The knight then approached Trance and Odin, “Let me see what your horse recorded,” he said pleasantly.

In a couple keystrokes Trance brought up the same footage that he had shown France, Jaymmol, and Hollen. The knight carefully reviewed the recording and then watched Hollen’s footage again. Then he turned to Frane, “Frane, it is clear to me that this recruit is lucky to be alive.”

“Sir, this is just trying to cover the fact that he flew off course and failed to qualify,” Frane continued.

“I don’t think so. I watched from the stands and saw all of his qualifications and after reviewing the footage, I think someone did try to shoot him off his horse. And further his horse is approved, no argument, do it now. And one more thing, I want the security recordings from around the archery range checked out. I want whoever was in that area to be investigated.”

Frane stood about to speak again and realized that there was nothing more he could say and do. “Yes sir. I will have the area thoroughly checked out.” Almost angrily he stepped up to a monitor and entered the code that Odin was qualified and would be Trance’s warhorse. Then he turned to the next recruit and almost brutally continued with the qualifications.

Trance dismounted and he watched gratefully as Hollen and a couple attendants disconnected the flight pack and took it off Odin and took it back to the stables. Trance tried to relax and watch the remaining horses try to qualify. Frane tried hard to fail the next four horses and succeeded with the fifth horse, which was much older than Odin and did not run fast at all. Hamon came over to Trance and whispered, “I didn’t think of this till now. Frane used to serve under Rex’s dad. He is a general in the Golden Griffins.”

Trance grimaced. This was going to make training very tough. It had been obvious to him the way these trials had gone on. “I’ll just do my best then and show him what I can do.”

The last horse was approved and the instructors gathered their recruits together and led them to a staging area near the horse tracks and shooting range. Trance and the recruits with him from his barracks are arranged in seats among dozens of squads and the hundreds of other recruits. Nearly to his surprise the knight that had given orders for Odin’s approval was the base commander, Colonel Welton.

Welton was introduced and spoke about the base and welcomed all of the recruits. “You will undergo many training classes. If you apply yourselves and take care of each other, your armor, and your weapons, you will be the finest knights in the kingdom and on the planet. Some of you may also succeed in making the Golden Griffins the elite of all knights. Gentlemen and ladies I charge you to your instructors. Tomorrow you will wake and the forging process will begin. Everyone welcome to the Forge.”

Then a major took the stage and gave the full oath to the recruits and moments later the recruits were dismissed to say goodbye to their families. Trance had several mixed emotions as he met up with his family again. This was the last he would see them for months. Evan stepped up and hugged his son and said, “Good luck. Show them what metal you are made of.”

“Take care Trance. You can beat anyone here,” Sammy said encouragingly.

“Okay, just a quick hug,” Heather said and quickly hugged Trance. “Good luck, this is what you have been striving for and I know you’ll do great.”

Eileen could hardly speak and just held onto Trance. Finally she was able to speak, “Take extra care, follow instructions and do your best. I know that in four months you’ll make it to Golden Griffin training. If it is meant to be then you’ll make it there as well. Remember that we love you and we’re always there for you.”

Trance couldn’t speak as they walked back to the barracks and he finally waved goodbye to them. He entered the barracks and went to his bed and was joined by many of his friends. They talked for a few hours before Frane came in and spoke, “All right everyone, it’s time for lights out. I want silence and everyone to get a good night’s sleep, tomorrow you belong to me,” and he turned and flipped the light switch off and headed to his room.

The room bustled as everyone headed to their beds and got into nightclothes. Trance lay down in his bed and looked up at the stark ceiling. He prayed silently and did his best to relax as a couple tears slid down his cheek. He heard Rex chuckle from one direction and a few other recruits openly weep from another direction. This was going to be a tough night. Sleep finally came and he dreamed of the day he just had and about tomorrow. What his classes would be like, how tough the instructors were, and then he saw Rex gloating over him. At that same moment he felt an awful pain in his side.

Chapter 11

Courtesy and Combat

Frane entered the barracks the next morning and immediately called the squad to attention. In short order Trance and his fellow recruits got dressed in their basic uniforms and made their beds. Frane quickly went through the daily schedule and had the squad form up and lead them out to one of the tracks and marched them around four times before leading them to Geography classes.

Trance sat through the hour and a half class and then followed to the gymnasium. The squad was there for a weight training class. They found out that later that day they would have an endurance class. Frane led the way to their first weapons class.

On entering the room, Trance spotted a wall of swords. This is okay, he thought, at least we can start with the sword. On a nearby wall stood a rack with a vast array of aging training swords, all of which had dull edges and rounded points. The instructor of the class was a large knight with skin the color of fresh coffee and neatly trimmed mustache and beard.

“My name is Major Courvain. I am your swordsman instructor. If any of you think you can take me, I assure you that you are no match for me,” the knight said as he looked around at the young men and focused for a moment on Rex. “Now each of you needs to select a sword that is similar to what your sword will be.”

Trance became very annoyed when Rex and his friends immediately went to the rack and selected the best and nicest looking swords. By the time he got to the swords more than half were already taken. Carefully he scanned the remaining swords and there toward the far side was an old battered two-handed broadsword. It was unique and everyone seemed to avoid it. Trance drew it out and took a careful look at it. The balance seemed good, not perfect, and the blade had a slight bend to it. He would take the time later to get the blade straightened out. For now he took the sword and found a place on the floor.

The room was half the size of the gym and everyone seemed to have lots of room to swing their swords without hitting one another. Courvain took his own large sword to the front of the room and gave his first instruction. “All right Pages, I want you to take the stance that best fits you. If you want to know what stance to take, look at your pads, look up ‘Swords the Elite Weapon’ and look up page twelve.”

Instantly half the room took a position while the other half looked up the page they were directed to and then took a starting position with their sword. Trance noticed that Rex and his friends took very aggressive stances and most of his friends took a more defensive stance. With a glance around it seemed that slightly more than half were aggressive. Kyle and Corena had told him what electronic books he would need at the Forge. Trance had checked them out on his pad at home and read through them during the summer and knew what stance he would take. Instantly he took his position and waited.

Courvain surveyed the room and starting with the front line of recruits immediately started correcting the grips and stances. Rex had the least review of his grip and stance and he smiled smugly around as Courvain continued across the room and along the next line. In the third line he comes to Trance and is brought to a standstill. This is truly unexpected. He had heard about Trance and looked forward to seeing how he shaped up. He could tell that Trance’s grip was near perfect; however, it was the stance that stood out. It was neither aggressive nor defensive.

“Page, what are you doing? You need to take a proper stance,” Courvain said, raising his voice.

“Sir, I am in a proper stance,” Trance replied in a calm voice that hid his inner self that was shaking.

“What proper stance are you taking? I look around the room and see examples of the three aggressive stances and examples of the three defensive stances, and you are standing out in neither. How then can you say that you are in a proper stance? Didn’t you look at the page I mentioned?” Courvain said as he looked around the room.

Trance was fully prepared with his answer and said, “Sir, I am in an assertive stance. In fact this is stance three found in Appendix C page six hundred and thirty seven.”

Courvain’s retort froze in his mouth. In the fifteen years that he had taught this class at the Forge he had never had a recruit use anything other than either an aggressive stance or defensive. Was this new, there was only one-way to know. “Give me your pad,” he demanded and Trance handed him his pad. In a moment Courvain had the electronic book open and found the page Trance had mentioned. There on the page near the very end of the book were the three assertive stances. He looked up and saw that Trance was perfectly holding the third assertive stance. “It appears that you are correct Page. Since you seem to favor this position we can see how well it works. Clear a space,” he commanded and immediately Courvain had his sword in hand in an aggressive stance and faced Trance.

Trance did not expect this and readied himself for what may come. Courvain instantly swung and in the flick of his wrist Trance blocked the swing. Courvain swung again and once again Trance blocked the blow. This was unusual, Courvain swung again and again and Trance blocked and parried every blow. With more accuracy and speed Courvain tries to penetrate Trance’s defenses.

“Very well, it seems that you are good at defending yourself with this stance. Now let’s see how well you are on the offense,” Courvain says and steps back prepared for Trance.

Taking a deep breath, Trance took his stance again and in a move swifter that Courvain expected he swung and nearly connected with the instructor. Courvain stepped back again and was nearly struck by Trance again. Impressive, he had not been challenged like this for six years. He knew he might have a challenge from Rex but this was a pleasant surprise. This time when Trance swung, Courvain engaged him and both men clashed swords back and forth. They dueled for five more minutes before Courvain made a sudden move and Trance’s sword left his hand.

Courvain knew it was a lucky blow, to cover for his surprise he said, “All right Page, that was a good start. Get your sword and take your place again.” He sheathed his own sword and proceeded to go correct the grips and stances of the remaining recruits. Now with everyone with a proper grip and stance he continued his first lesson.

Frane had watched the whole scene from a chair at the side of the room and had quietly rooted for Courvain. Let the upstart get something coming to him. However, as they had dueled he was surprised at how smoothly Trance moved. This may be harder than he had been told.

The class continued as they learned the first moves with their swords. After the class ended everyone took their swords back. Near the door Rex commented, “Well it’s lucky that Courvain didn’t try to duel me. Everyone knows I could have taken him or at least lasted longer than five minutes.”

“Oh really,” Hamon said as he set his training sword in the rack. “I seem to recall that at the end of year tournaments you lost in every sword event to Trance. So what would make you think you could beat Courvain.”

“That was all luck and everyone knows it. The next time Trance and I go at it you’ll see who the real master swordsman is,” Rex snapped.

“Really,” Gracer said, “I would love to see you go down once again.”

Before more words could be exchanged, Frane yelled and hustled his squad out and headed them to their next class. This time they were to learn the mace. Trance was not as good with the mace. He quickly learned that he would learn every weapon, not just the four that he would have to qualify with. Weapon after weapon was studied until lunch. After lunch, the squad continued to learn the various weapons. One of his last classes that day was on military rules and courtesy. As Trance looked at the syllabus and began to read chapter one, he was struck by the reasons the king could declare war on another kingdom or planet. One reason in particular startled him. War could be started if a member of the royal house was either kidnapped or murdered. Could that really happen? To end the day the squad had to march around the track again before heading to dinner and then the barracks.

Day after day the squad followed their schedule and worked on their weapons skills. To Trance’s amazement, Rex was a very poor archer. Yet Rex would make a big deal of every shot Trance missed or came up short of the required seventy-five points. Rex could usually get the points, barely, but he made it clear this was not one of his four weapons.

Trance did his best to work on his skill with all of the weapons. He also tried his best to learn in the classroom. There was not only Geography and Military Courtesy; there were classes on strategy, castle designs and defenses, and a class on the different known armors. This was a fascinating class as the instructor had a set of typical Althorian armor and armor from other kingdoms and planets. On this particular day the instructor had a set of typical Boulthorian armor.

“You see that the Boulthorians focus more on plate armor. This gives them an advantage in protection. However, this armor does have its limits. For instance, their movements are more restrictive. You can see that advancements have been made to add flexible plates, but still they cannot move as smoothly as our knights. If you look at every point on the Althorian armor the mail is thicker yet allows for more natural movement. This gives our knights a slight advantage in movement. There is still the knight’s skill to be considered. A Boulthorian knight has to undergo twice the combat training. Yet the quality of training you will receive is above excellent and has been perfected over centuries. Now we will go in detail on the Boulthorian armor, its strengths and weaknesses,” said the aging instructor.

Trance found that he was one of three recruits that had ever encountered a Boulthorian knight and he was asked to describe his experiences. He did his best to describe the defense of the Markem’s farm and then there was the time a few days later that he had assisted in defending Corena from another troop of Boulthorian knights. On those occasions he quickly learned a couple weak spots in their armor. Now he learned that there were a few more places where they were vulnerable. Not surprisingly he learned that there was not a single set of perfect armor.

Although Althorian armor did not have the amount of plates, it had more mail and the combination together was such that it did not make a difference. Another difference was that overall the Boulthorians had a smaller shield due to the amount of plate armor, and the Althorians had a slightly larger shield to make up for the plate armor.

The following day Trance noticed that they were having classes with the girl’s squad that was next to theirs. This was great Trance thought as he got to spend a little time with Corena. He still went to the sword he selected in his first swords class, and he had taken his free time to get the sword cleaned up and the blade straightened. A few of his friends thought he was nuts, but they soon changed their mind as he showed how good he was. Corena took an elegant older looking sword and was a superb swordswoman.

Courvain had quickly learned how good Trance was. Rex however, tried to either avoid being chosen to duel Courvain, or he did not last nearly as long as Trance did. Trance could increasingly feel Rex’s hate for him. Rex could nearly dominate every recruit he was pitted against in individual challenges. So far the rematch of Rex and Trance had not happened yet.

Trance did his best to concentrate. He found that he occasionally had difficulty focusing due to being distracted by Corena. He took more lumps today in the weapons classes due to him trying to be close to her or watching her. Another distraction was that they were going to have an open weekend and Corena was going to take him around tomorrow.

The archery class was next and Trance was in a group of ten recruits, five male and five female, including Corena. In pairs of one young man and one young woman they rotated shooting at the targets. Trance was excited and very nervous finding that he was partnering with Corena. They stepped up to the line and Trance admired her calm as she took an arrow and very smoothly drew the bow back and sighted the target. In a moment she released the arrow and it sped to the round target and sank in the bull’s-eye.

Trance felt everyone watching him as he took an arrow and set it to the string. He did his best to relax as he drew back and aimed. He held the arrow maybe a moment longer than Corena and released the arrow. Dang, he thought as the arrow scored eight. They went to the back of the line and waited as the other pairs took their shots.

“Relax,” Corena said. “Don’t think of anything but where you want the arrow to go. I know it may be hard, but forget that you are paired with me.”

“Sorry,” Trance replied. “That is rather difficult. I keep thinking about our date this weekend.”

“I am too, but I can focus on hitting the target. We’ll have a great time though,” she said as they stepped up again. She drew another arrow and hit another bull’s-eye.

Trance shook his head and tried to clear his thoughts. He found it was still difficult, Corena’s beautiful face kept floating in and he kept thinking about all the fun things they were going to do. He nocked another arrow and drew back. This time he scored a nine. However, his next arrow hit seven.

“Come on, relax. What if you’re in a real battle? You can’t worry about me, you would lose your focus and an enemy knight could take you out. Then what would you think, you just left me alone for the rest of my life,” Corena said trying to get him to focus.

He focused on what she said and hit nine. With their final shots Corena finished with a score of ninety-seven while Trance finished with seventy-six. Whew, he made the required score. They left the target range with their group as the next set of ten took their place. “I think that was the highest I have ever scored,” Corena said.

Trance tried to smile. His highest score was seventy-eight. “I will try harder to focus next time.”

“Like I keep telling you, it is just a matter of focusing on where you want the arrow to go. And it also helps to aim just an inch over where you think,” and she winked at him.

Trance felt his face burn. The rest of the day flew past and he continued to try to relax and study while part of his brain dwelled on the weekend. He also tried to think about what Corena had said. What if he was in the heat of battle and he thought about her. Would he be able to stay in the moment and concentrate, or would he lose focus and be killed. He couldn’t have that. Not just that his life would be over, but he would leave her and his family and all of their dreams.

Finally in his bed that night he kept thinking about his dream of marrying Corena. What would that mean? What about their military careers, and she was royalty. Would he be made king one day if they married? He didn’t know. What he did know was he had no ambition to be king. Just being a Golden Griffin was what he wanted.

Sun blazed through the window that morning waking most of the young men. Trance snorted a heavy breath and rolled to his back and looked up. All he saw was the same old ceiling, but what he heard was quite different. Various squad members were up and about and making plans for the day. A few had dates; others were getting together to play Valian. There were even a few that were going to the park of amusement. As Trance sat up he distinctly heard Rex boasting to his friends.

“And yesterday I shot an amazing ninety-three. It’s a shame I have not chosen the bow for one of my weapons. I would easily qualify with it. In fact I’m ready to qualify for all of my weapons and move onto the Golden Griffins.”

Trance mentally groaned and stood up and went to his trunk to get out his clothes for the day. This wasn’t new. Rex was always trying to make himself look great and in the same breath taking shots at Trance. Whatever, let him gloat, at least Rex didn’t know where Trance and Corena were going. He dressed as quickly as possible and then froze as he heard Rex continue.

“Today I think I want to stretch my legs and visit Voilend, maybe take in a show, or even go to the museum,” Rex said, making sure his voice was heard across the room. “I think I might ask Jezzafer if she would like to go,” he said, referring to a dark red haired girl from his school who was a regular opponent of Corena.

Ugh, Trance thought. On second thought it might not be such a bad idea. Give someone else for Rex to go after. Jezzafer was pretty in her way with a fair complexion and pleasant figure. However, personality wise, she was more like Rex. Come to think of it, they actually fit together. “Well I think that is a fantastic idea. You would make a really nice couple,” Trance said as he put on his shoes and stood. Before Rex could make a nasty remark Trance added, “Look at that, I need to be out front. Have a good day.” Swiftly he strode to the door and in a moment he was out and down the seven steps to the sidewalk.

He took a clearing breath and looked at his chron and saw that he was ten minutes early. What should he do? He looked up and down the avenue in front of the barracks looking for Corena. Impulsively he started to walk around the barracks and tried hard to clear his mind of anything but how much fun today was going to be.

Back at the front of the building he looked around and did not see anything. He was about to make another lap when he got the faint sound of a carriage. Trance stopped and listened and thought that the carriage was heading in his direction. Yes, he thought, it is coming this way. He closed his eyes for a moment to listen and it definitely sounded like two robot horses were pulling the carriage. Strange, they don’t sound like the horses that pull his parent’s carriage.

Trance opened his eyes in time to see the two powerful and magnificent looking horses pulling a sharp looking royal purple two seated carriage. In a moment Trance could see the driver and his smile went to his eyes.

“Why hello there handsome,” Corena said as she pulled up next to him and rolled down the passenger side window.

“Hello gorgeous,” Trance responded as he stepped up to the door and opened it.

He climbed in the carriage and immediately looked around and noticed the interior. It was luxurious, but not overly so. The bench seat was black leather and ergonomically contoured, and the gauges looked like fine timepieces. Trance even noticed that the control sticks, a variation on the reigns for robot horses, were more ergonomic than the ones on Kishara. If his memory was correct, this was a Regal Afflor, a luxury carriage a step above a sports chariot.

Trance leaned over and gave Corena a quick kiss and in moments the carriage raced away. Trance relaxed in his seat as Corena expertly drove the carriage across the base and took them to the front gate. Outside the gate they merged with traffic and made their way to the cinema. Now in the city Trance had a chance to check out the buildings.

He noticed that the architecture was very similar to that of Caldora. It was what he considered modern Renaissance. Some of the buildings were definitely more gothic, and some were more modern. There were even a variety of churches and cathedrals. A few buildings were round towers that stretched to the sky.

Corena pointed out a couple buildings as they went along, “That is the museum, and we will check that out a little later. Over there is the Counts palace. And here is where we are going,” she said, indicating the cinema.

Trance was stunned as he gazed up at the motion picture house. He was astonished at the building. In his mind he had envisioned that they would go to a luxurious theatre like a couple he knew from his past. Yet here was a nice clean theatre and from the marquee he saw that it had sixteen screens.

Corena parked the carriage and leaned over for another quick kiss from Trance. They stepped out of the carriage and walked toward the door hand in hand. Inside Corena led the way to the ticket counter. “I think you’ll enjoy ‘King Blades: The Forging,’ it is a fantasy historical film. Have you seen the ads for it?”

“Yes I have,” answered Trance. He easily recalled the fantastic ads to the motion picture of an ancient period of Althora’s history. It seemed like there was a Great War happening and three ancient kings formed an alliance to fight these hideous creatures and each king had a special sword forged to fight them. The ads made it seem like everyone should know the basic story and what the swords were called.

“Great,” Corena said before Trance could think more about the ads. “We’ll take two tickets for ‘King Blades: The Forging’ please.”

The ticket clerk looked up and was momentarily taken aback as to who was standing there in front of her. Immediately she composed herself and said, “That will be ten currents please.”

Corena dropped Trance’s hand to get in her handbag and pulled out an engraved silver bar about the size of a domino and handed it to the clerk. “Out of twenty,” the clerk said and in a moment handed Corena back a brass domino worth ten currents.

Corena then led the way to the refreshment stand and they bought a couple carbonated drinks and a bag of roasted nuts. They walked the short distance to their screening room and found seats near the middle. Trance noticed several people taking glances at them as they passed by. With a fluttering heart he sat back and took a drink to try to relax. A few minutes later the lights went down and the great crimson velvet curtain slid open to reveal the screen. This was just like back on Earth.

Soon the motion picture show started and Trance found himself fascinated by the story. Like always to him he suddenly lost focus of everything around him, including Corena. He was immersed in the story of these kings and the war they were fighting. In progression each of these kings had their swords ruined and they needed new swords forged for them. Interesting as the story gave the origin of tri-forging. However, a bigger surprise awaited him. The names given to these swords, most prominent was the Lion Sword, next was the Falcon Sword, third Excalibur. His mind turned as the story continued. Could this be the Excalibur of legend?

The picture show ended in a cliffhanger setting up the sequel that would come out next year. As they left the theatre Trance glanced around. He still remembered Rex wanted to ruin their day. Once in the carriage Corena leaned over and caught him by surprise and took his mind away from Rex by giving him a much more passionate kiss.

Corena pulled away and took the carriage controls and drove them to a nearby restaurant where she had made reservations. Once again Trance was surprised at her choice of location and followed her. They went to a private table that was separated from the rest of the restaurant. Trance still felt his lips and face flushed from the kiss and his hand slightly shook as he took the menu and looked at it. With a growing smile on his face and the thought that she keeps surprising him he started to figure out what he wanted.

“I recommend the supreme velops steak,” Corena said leaning forward and pointing to a picture of her favorite. “And have it with the baked sugar root.”

They placed their orders and Trance sat back and once again felt heat to his face as they were holding hands again. His mind swirled and he sought something to talk about. Then he recalled the show and he asked a couple questions. “You said the show was based on historical fact, right. What happened to the kings and their swords?”

“Well,” Corena said with a smile on her face. “If the history books are accurate, the kings won that war as you saw. They passed the swords down to their descendants. It is said that Vivian, a ruling Queen of Durth was aboard a stellar vessel that malfunctioned and vanished. It appeared centuries later and the crew with a descendant of Vivian with tales of a distant planet and an island kingdom. They still had Excalibur in possession. I think the sword is in a museum in Durth to this day. Now, sometime in the past the Falcon Sword was stolen, nobody knows who stole it and where it might have been taken. Now there is more about the Lion Sword. It is deeply connected to the tales and legends of the Griffin General.”

“So the swords did exist,” Trance asked excitedly. Wow, maybe this is where Excalibur came from. He waited to hear more.

“Most of the stories of the Lion Sword end the same way,” Corena said with a glint in her eye.

“How is that,” Trance asked.

“They end that Cothor, one of my own ancestors, wielded the sword till he was slain in the Crown Mountains fighting an invading army of Sphinx. Now when he went down, the sword flew from his hand and landed in a bush and disturbed a Death Snake.”

Trance was intrigued. “Was the Lion Sword ever found?”

“No. To this day there have been many expeditions to the Crown Mountains and the sword has never been found.”

“What would happen if the sword was found,” Trance asked.

“That is the critical thing,” Corena said, “Prophecy says that whoever finds the Lion Sword will be the Great Griffin General and defeat the Sphinx ending their power and lead to a period of peace. ‘Peace will not last. Seven will stand then the deceiver will take power and then seven wait till the only begotten returns.’ Or something like that.”

Trance pondered this and then they began talking about more pleasant topics. He kissed her more after dinner before she drove them back to base. Trance never did see Rex. That was a relief. Later that night he laid in bed thinking about the wonderful day and pondered the show and what Corena had said about the swords and what about the Lion Sword. When would the sword be found if ever and who will find it? Probably a Griffin no doubt, and would he live to see it.

Chapter 12

The Point of the Lance

A week had passed since his date with Corena and Trance had distinguished himself to be promoted to attend an officer’s class. Most of his close friends had qualified for the class as well as Rex and four of his friends. Here he studied higher levels of courtesy and techniques in motivating and leading men.

“You will learn a distinct difference here,” the instructor said. He was a noble distinguished man with wolf grey hair and what Trance thought of a Roman nose. “In this class you will learn to be a true leader on the field. All of you are capable of being captains in the field of battle. Look at this illustration,” he said as he pointed to the screen in the front of the room, “Would you rather lead like this example, staying in the back and directing your men toward the enemy while you lag behind, or will you be like this noble leader by leading the charge from the front and directing your men as you go. True, this puts you in a vulnerable position, but you will gain the admiration and respect of your men who will gladly follow you into the thickest worst battle. And if you survive your men will be bolder and more dedicated to you.”

Trance nodded and smiled internally. That was exactly how he had led his team last year in all of the combat competitions. He also could not help the grins and glances he got from his friends. Likewise, they smirked as they looked across the room to where Rex reclined in his chair. Trance could not miss Rex’s sneer as he looked at the illustrations. Guess which one you are, he thought as he focused again on the instructor.

“You have all been invited to this class and I hope that you all live up to the expectations of those that recommended you. Don’t disappoint them or me. Now here is your first lesson,” and he swung around and with a remote in one hand and a pointer in the other he began.

The following class was an interesting class that combined the maps of geography with strategy. In detail the class studied real battles from the past in simulations from every angle including troop placement and numbers, all geographical surroundings, and the strategies that both commanders had employed. Not all situations were of Althorians versus Boulthorians. On occasion it was the Griffins, Sphinx, or others involved. Trance paid special attention because what he considered the good side did not always win, and sometimes it was a devastating defeat. Most tragic was that sometimes the defeat was due to what the ‘good’ commander had done.

The instructor had a very sure and aggressive attitude. With precision he diagnosed the battle simulations and was direct on how he would have changed the outcome with a slight change in strategy. As he was showing one particular battle he went into what he would have done to swing the battle around and then he turned to the class and directed a question to them. “How would each of you have directed this battle?”

In turn every member of the class voiced up an opinion and the instructor was quick to break down all of their comments. He seemed very impressed with how Rex would have directed the battle. Finally he turned to Trance.

“Sonderson, how would you have changed the direction of this battle?”

Trance took everyone’s opinions and noticed their flaws as well as the commander’s flaws. At first he didn’t know what to say so he looked at the screen. Slowly as always he found himself drawn into the screen. What would he do? He looked around and then it came to him. “I think I would have pulled my archers back to that rise and my spearmen to that row. Turn that small valley into a killing ground.”

The instructor stopped for a moment and actually nodded. He turned to the screen and pointed at the areas that Trance had mentioned. “You know that may actually work. However, you still might lose a lot of men to this. Now this is the next battle I want you to examine.”

As they left the room later, Hamon patted Trance on the shoulder. “That was a great idea you had. I didn’t even think of that.”

“Thanks. I just thought about how I directed the team last year and thought about how I had the archers on the wall in castle defense,” Trance said modestly. “The way that captain had his archers did not make sense to me. There isn’t any way they could get a good shot off from where he had them placed.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Hamon said. “He had them in the middle of his squad. I might have them near the front maybe. But you even thought of placing them on that ridge with even a better shot at the enemy troops.”

They talked on for a few minutes as they headed to their endurance and strength classes. Trance was in his rotation of the endurance equipment and was sitting at the leg butterfly device when he noticed that he had company. He didn’t have to look up to know that Rex and three of his friends had invaded his space. “Hello Rex,” he said as he continued to work his legs.

“Hey. So did you and Corena have a good time a week ago? Where did you guy’s go, I didn’t see you at the theatre,” Rex said with mock curiosity.

Trance took a moment to think about his answer. “Yeah, we had a great time. How about you, did you and Jezzafer have a good time.”

Rex smiled wolfishly, “Yes we did. We had a fabulous time. So we didn’t see you at the theatre, I had heard that she was taking you to that new romance picture, ‘The Crimson Rose.’”

Once again Trance thought carefully about his answer. “No, we went to see ‘King Blades: The Forging,’ why do you ask?”

Rex’s face changed slightly. That would explain why he had not seen them in the screening room, however, he had not seen them in the theatre. “So, which theatre did you go to? We went to the Aurarian Theatre,” Rex said about the deluxe royal theatre.

“Oh, I bet that was terrific, I’m sure Jezzafer had a fantastic time,” Trance said, realizing where the conversation was heading. “Well, Corena had taken me to a very nice smaller theatre. I did not get the name, I was a little distracted,” he said as he resumed working his legs.

“Ah,” said Rex, “Well after the show I don’t think I saw you at Leous.”

Corena had mentioned the Leous restaurant before. According to her it was very exclusive and snooty. Of course she had been there with her family, but to be honest, she considered it to be incredibly overpriced and overrated. “I would rather go to a family owned and run small town restaurant. At least I will get a meal where they care about the customer rather than being famous and exclusive,” she had told him one time.

“I hope you had a fantastic meal there,” Trance said as politely as possible and tried to continue to concentrate on his legs. “We went to a fabulous restaurant called Madame Kraus’s. It was simply wonderful.” Trance took a moment to look up at Rex’s face and had to choke down a smile as Rex struggled to maintain his cool composure.

“Really, she took you to that dump. I wouldn’t feed my hound leftovers from that place,” Rex said spitefully. He didn’t totally mean it; he had taken his friends there three weeks ago. “I heard that the meat they get was rejected from every other restaurant.”

“Their mistake,” Trance said, keeping his cool. He just wants to get you upset. Stay calm and let him be the one to lose his composure.

“Really,” Rex replied as his ire started to rise. “Where did you go after that? Did you finally get to take her to bed? That would be some feat since she has an escort everywhere she goes. I wonder what that would be like to have her while being watched.”

Trance felt his face burn this time. This was getting into the gutter. Trance stopped and this time looked Rex in the eye. “For your information, that is none of your business. I suppose you had your way with Jezzafer. My relationship with Corena is between us. I must disappoint you that we have not had relations, which is by mutual agreement and between us. I think it will be better and sweeter after we are married if that is in our future. Now this conversation is over.” He began to work his legs again.

Rex was about to continue and get even nastier when the gym instructor approached. “You four, shouldn’t you be working on something? There are empty devices for you to be at. Now move, I want you sweating in five minutes or you’ll stay and work an extra hour for me.”

Rex nodded to his friends and stepped away to an arm curl machine. Trance finished his round with the leg machine and swapped places with Gracer who was on a squat machine. The class ended and friends suddenly surrounded Trance, as they seemed to shield him from a fuming Rex that seemed bound to continue the conversation he had started.

This afternoon they had another new class. Trance and his squad had just been given their training armor; their regular armor and weapons would be given in two weeks time. Today Trance would need his armor and put it on and then followed the group and Frane who was teaching this class. Frane led the class down to the stables, “Get your horses and follow me to the training field.”

Trance went and patted Odin before leading him down to the field where a framework system was set up on the jousting field. Strangely it reminded him of the spit frame at the Markems. “I wonder what that is for?” he asked Hamon.

“I think we’re going to learn how to take a fall off our horses,” Hamon responded. “That thing will have a simple blunt lance and we ride toward it with only our shield and take the blow which should unhorse us. We just need to learn how to take the blow so when we are unhorsed we fall and land where we can roll to our feet and continue on.”

Just at that moment Frane called for quiet. “Today you will learn how to take a blow that’ll unhorse you and how you should fall. I don’t want to find out that you passed this class and after passing and graduating you are taken down in your first battle. Now when you are unhorsed I want you to roll like this,” and he demonstrated how he wanted them to land and roll to their feet after being unhorsed. “Okay, now let’s see how you take the hit and fall.”

Trance watched as the first boy mounted his horse and rode down the field and all too soon the unmistakable sound of the crunch of metal as the boy’s shield collided with the lance held in place on the frame by two clamps. As the boy fell awkwardly off his horse the lance dropped to the ground also and moments later as the boy tried to roll and failed to make it to his feet a second set of arms reached out from the frame and retrieved the fallen lance and the main arms extended down to the loading bay and lifted up another blunt pointed lance. Another young man mounted his horse and again the crash of metal. This young man was able for a moment to get to his feet.

One after another the young men rode down the field to be unhorsed. Trance was thankful for his training armor that he was wearing, but he did know that he would hit the ground like everyone else. Zam was next and he took the blow better than most of the others before him. Trance waited in line as Rex mounted his horse.

Hamon and Gracer nudged Trance as they eagerly waited for that familiar crunch of metal. Sure enough Rex took the blow and rolled off his horse and after hitting the ground he rolled to his feet.

“That is more like it. Rex, that was almost perfect. I can tell that you’ll surely survive on the field after being unhorsed. Can anyone else take the blow like that? Hamon, you’re next,” Frane said.

Hamon rode his horse toward the frame and hit the lance square on with his shield. Trance watched as his friend was lifted off his horse and seemed to have a hard fall and he mentally groaned as Hamon hit the ground. However, he was relieved as Hamon did a roll on the ground and came right up to his feet. Not surprising Frane only grimaced and made no comment on how Hamon had done.

Gracer was next and hit the ground hard and stayed down for a whole minute as another trainer checked on him. Trance was glad when Gracer was on his feet and walking back to his horse. One more young man was before Trance and this young man took the blow wrong and when he fell was knocked unconscious. Great, Trance thought, that could be me next.

“Okay Trance, it is your turn. I heard that you can take a big hit off your horse and keep going, let’s see you prove it,” Frane said, almost mocking.

Trance knew well what Frane was talking about. The memory of being unhorsed at the end of year tournaments by Golic in the axeman jousts still brought a chill to his spine. With grim determination he mounted Odin and rode him to the starting line and waited for the signal to ride. There it was and he hoisted his shield in the proper position and concentrated on riding toward the lance. Then he saw it and he felt his eyes grow large and fear flooded his body freezing his blood. In a moment he tossed his shield and threw himself off Odin feet away from the frame as Odin finished his run.

“What was that? Trance you were to ride and take the blow on your shield, not toss it and throw yourself off like some coward. I always thought you were supposed to be the most noble and courageous. Now we see that you’re nothing more than…”

“Sir,” Trance said as loudly as he could get his lungs to muster at the moment after a hard fall. “I was going to take the blow; however, as I was riding up I saw that the lance had a razor point on it and it was set at the proper killing zone.”

“Ridiculous. I loaded this device myself and there are only blunt lances in it. Check it out for yourself, the lance is right there,” Frane said almost condescending.

Trance and his friends looked and indeed a blunt lance was held steady in the frame's clamps. How, Trance asked in his head.

“Trance, I want you to mount your horse again and this time take the blow like a man and let’s see how you land and roll to your feet,” Frane taunted.

Trance went and retrieved his shield and stalked back to Odin. As he mounted the horse he leaned forward and asked, “Did you record that run?”

Odin replied almost embarrassed and sorry, “Sorry master, I did not. Would you like me to record this run?”

“Yes and zoom in on the lance. Don’t worry about me. I have an idea, just take me down this time and wait for my instructions,” Trance said as he sat up and rode Odin back to the start.

The signal came and Odin took off and Trance focused on the frame and this time he saw it. The arms swiftly lowered and set the blunt lance back in the rack and swept up a deadly war lance from another compartment and held it out. Trance did not have much time. He hoped that Odin had recorded the scene. Just another moment or two and off he leapt with his shield still on his arm and he landed on his feet not far from the frame. He took a breath and waited for what was about to happen.

“Sonderson, what in hell’s blazes was that? Were you or were you not supposed to ride into the blunt lance and take the fall. You have now wasted two attempts to learn what I am here to teach you.”

Trance stood his ground and faced Frane. “Sir once again there was a war lance in the frame and it was set in the kill zone.”

“And once again that is totally not possible. I don’t think you want to take this class and embarrass yourself by taking the hit and learning how to take a fall from horseback.”

“Sir, as I said I watched the device holding a war lance. Are you sure there are no war lances in the device.”

Frane laughed as he said, “There are no war lances in the device. I loaded all of the lances myself.”

A movement caught the corner of Trance’s eye. “All right, if as you say, you loaded all of the lances in the device and there is not a war lance loaded then I’ll make one more run and definitely connect with the lance.” Boldly he went and picked up his shield and again mounted Odin.

As he rode Odin to the start line he heard a familiar voice, “What is going on?”

“Nothing that concerns you, Hollen,” Frane said, annoyed. “Why are you here? This is my class and I don’t need any assistance. Certainly you have orders to be somewhere else.” And he turned and watched Trance ride back to the start.

“For your information my orders are my concern. Ah, before you say something more, I will add that they come from way up the ladder. So, what is going on,” Hollen said, holding his ground.

Frane turned and looked at Hollen square in the face, flames of fury visible in his eyes. “I said this is none of your concern. I don’t care what your orders are or came from. You have no authority here, now move on.”

Hollen felt his own ire rising yet he knew his orders and was prepared. “Since you insist I will be happy to call the base commander and have him decide if I have authority or not.” He almost casually reached for his comp pad.

Frane hesitated for only a moment before taking a short breath and said, “Well, since you insist, Trance has failed to ride and take the hit from the training lances so he can learn to take the fall properly. I am having him ride again, and this time, take the hit like a man.”

“Excuse me sir,” Gracer chimed in. Frane turned and looked ready to explode. Gracer continued fearlessly, “You left out the part that Trance claimed that there was a war lance on the frame and that it was in the kill zone.”

“What?” asked Hollen, shocked.

“That is true,” Hamon asserted.

“Do I have to say this again? That is not possible. I loaded the device myself and there are no war lances in the device. Trance is just being a coward and is trying to cover for it by making up a story of the war lance.”

“Somehow I don’t think so. I have been around Trance a lot since training started and I have not ever seen or heard him tell anything false for any reason,” Hollen asserted.

Frane fought his emotions and could not contradict him, and mentally he tried. Instead he turned back to the field and watched the signal and saw Trance start his ride.

At the starting line Trance leaned forward and said, “When I give you the signal, sway out to the left.” He sat up and watched for the signal. There it was and he urged Odin forward. This time he did not hesitate, as Odin got up to a full gallop Trance tossed his shield aside and prepared to leap off. Sure enough he had clearly seen the device change lances and as before the war lance was in the kill position. Wait, not yet, just get a little closer he thought. Almost there, just another few feet, “Go Odin,” he said, giving the order.

Odin swerved and at the same time Trance leaped off of him and this time instead of just leaping away, he leaped toward the frame and on his way down grabbed the lance. The frame shuddered and shook with the impact. The clamps held the lance for an instant then let go and Trance again hit the ground and had his air knocked out of him. In his hands was the deadly war lance.

“Trance, are you okay,” Zam said, as he was the first to run up to his friend.

Trance heaved for breath and said in a strained voice, “Yeah, I think I’m okay.” He sucked in another breath and this time looked directly at Frane, “I think this lance has the wrong point on it. How did you miss loading this?”

There was a surge and everyone came closer and then everyone went silent as they realized what they were seeing. Hamon was the first to turn to Frane, “Sir that looks a lot like a war lance.”

Frane’s face froze. He clearly did not know what to say.

“So you loaded all of the lances and there was not a war lance in it. Well that lance came from some place,” Hollen said. Before Frane could form any retort Hollen took out his comp pad and recorded Trance holding the war lance and in a moment sent the footage to the base commander. A second later he was ordering everyone to stay put and he called base command and the security team.

Trance had lain back down and did his best to try to relax and regain his breathing. His fists clenched onto the lance and he waited for the security forces to run up and began asking questions. Okay, let’s get this over with so I can lie down for a couple hours and then we can continue to learn.

Chapter 13

The Bright Edge

Turmoil has engulfed the base. Frane was furious when he faced the base commander and learned that the incident was being investigated. Frane fumbled over his words as he tried to clarify and state that someone must have tampered with the jousting frame.

“Yet I have over forty witness statements that all say that you kept claiming that you personally loaded the frame and that there was no possible way that a war lance was in it.”

“Yes that is true that I said that. However, someone must have come along and added the war lance,” Frane said defensively.

“Oh, then explain to me the footage taken from Trance’s horse and that of Hollen. Can you explain to me how when a training lance is already in position all of a sudden the device changes and selects another lance from the secondary compartment? In fact when security inspected that device all of the lances in the secondary compartment were war lances. And again there is your statement that only you loaded the device,” Colonel Welton said.

Frane fumed, “As I said, someone must have come along later and loaded the war lances. I have heard that Trance has some serious enemies and one of them must want him out of the way.”

“That is interesting, since the only people that I have observed that dislike this young man are Rex and his friends from his team from school,” Welton said. Also, I don’t think you like him either, he thought. “The investigation will continue and in the meantime I am placing Jaymmol and Hollen to assist you with your squad.”

“Sir, I can handle my squad on my own. I do not need any pair of, well, outsiders interfering with my training methods.”

“Do I need to remind you that you are still on probation from the incident last year? That young man will never be the same due to your training methods. It is my duty to see that all of our trainees get the best possible training to be the best knights, pawns, and Golden Griffins to protect this kingdom and planet. Now Jaymmol and Hollen will join you starting tomorrow. You will meet with them and go over your schedule tonight,” Welton said with finality.

Frane stood and saluted before exiting the room and under his breath muttered a number of curses. He stalked down the hall and back to the barracks. Other trainers and trainees saw him coming and backed away from his dark and stormy looks. He made it to his room and sat down in his chair and only had a moment to relax. Suddenly his kythersig pinged and he reached out to answer his call.

The screen popped up and a pixelated image of a man. “Well what happened,” the image asked with an electronically altered voice.

“The commander has ordered an investigation and he has assigned two dimwits to assist me. I don’t need them and they’ll just get in our way,” France said venting his frustration.

“How is it that you have failed me? That boy should have been disqualified and expelled. Why is he still there?” asked the image.

Frane fumed and said, “I have done all I could to try to get him out of the way. Part of my issue is someone else is out there trying to permanently eliminate him. I have no idea who it is. Also there are times that he seems to be protected. How can I get him expelled while there are investigations going on trying to find the assassin?”

“Never mind the assassin. He is another member of our team. One way or another, the boy will be eliminated. Something that you can do is allow a situation to develop and do not interfere. You will know when it takes place. Do you have anything you want to add,” asked the figure on the screen.

Frane took this all in and thought for a moment. “No, I will bide my peace for now. When this takes place, do you want me to report to you?”

“No, I will know when it happens. Now get some rest, you are going to need it over the next few weeks,” and with that the image went blank again.

Frane fumed for only a few more moments before getting a stiff drink and sitting back to think about what might happen in the days ahead. Meantime, in a room at the royal palace a man stood and stretched. Who would know that he was behind these plans? Nobody would suspect him or could connect him to these communications. He had been incredibly careful setting up the random links and the encryption programs. All the benefits of being a Lord helped. Maybe soon I will finally be more; it should have been mine long ago. Now I have to dine with that idiot Maximus and attend a meeting. He reached up and touched his brown beard and in a couple strides reached his door and left.

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The weekend finds Trance waiting outside the barracks. He had showered and gotten dressed and somehow made it outside before Rex and his friends could taunt him. In moments he heard the carriage and knew his weekend just got better and sweeter.

“Hi, have you been waiting long,” Corena asked as she pulled up and rolled down the passenger window.

“Nope, not long at all. You won’t believe this but Rex wasn’t around when I came out,” Trance said as he entered the familiar carriage.

“Really,” she said, her brow furrowed. That was unusual, Rex was always trying to ruin their dates. To date he has been unsuccessful. “Well I hope he is happy with Jezzafer. Okay, there is a new motion picture I want to see. Are you okay with that?”

“That sounds great to me,” Trance said. “What are we going to see this time?”

“It is a romantic comedy called ‘The Unreachable Dowry,’” Corena said with a wink. Before she took the controls of the carriage she leaned over and they kissed. Moments later she drove them to the motion picture house. After they got their tickets and something to snack on and drink they walked hand in hand to a couple seats.

Trance found his concentration swinging between Corena and the screen. Soon however, he was laughing with Corena as the motion picture started. He found the film hysterical, the story of a young man who met this very desirable girl. They courted and planned to be engaged and when he went to her father to ask for her hand, the dad kept coming up with a higher and higher dowry. The dad’s reasoning was that he had two daughters and the older one was not nearly as attractive and still single. The young man tried and tried to raise the dowry and then found that a friend of his was attracted to the older daughter. He set them up and finally the father relented and he had his dowry.

“What a great picture,” Trance said through his laughter as the credits rolled. Several times he had laughed so hard that he nearly lost his breath and he had to wipe tears from his eyes. They got up and headed to the exit holding hands. Trance felt his heart pounding as he felt the warmth of Corena’s hand in his. His brain locked on one idea and he could not settle himself as they were getting close to the carriage. In what seemed to be moments they were there and Corena was about to disengage her hand so she could walk around to the driver’s door when Trance could not stop himself and he turned her gently to him and he leaned down and kissed her. To his surprise she kissed him back with equal passion. Never had he kissed her like this before. All too soon they parted, for only a moment and she pulled him back to her and kissed him again. It seemed that nothing existed outside of them.

They finally parted and this time Corena did disengage and with another quick kiss, she strode to the other side of the carriage to get in and Trance feeling very weak in the knees opened his door and entered the carriage. Corena drove them again to Madame Kraus’s and they again had a fantastic meal. They spent the afternoon then at the museum and then went to dinner. After dinner they kissed again in the carriage before heading back to the barracks. As Corena pulled up to drop him off Trance took a quick glance at the clock, he had sixteen minutes before he would be late. He leaned forward and gave her a good night kiss and he got out and waved as Corena drove away.

Trance felt ecstatically happy as he walked up to the barracks door. With his mind still thinking about Corena and their kiss he failed to notice that the room was unusually silent. I wonder why everyone is so quiet he thought a moment before Frane confronted him.

“Sonderson, what in hell’s blazes? What is your curfew?” Frane bellowed.

Trance took a moment to think and responded, “Nine AN (afternoon) is curfew. According to my watch it is fifteen minutes till.”

“Fifteen minutes till is it. Take a look at the wall chron,” Frane said, indicating the digital wall clock that was synced with all of the base clocks and the main Althorian central atomic time system accurate within two seconds.

Trance looked and was shocked that the clock in the room was at seventeen minutes past nine. “How is that possible?” Trance asked as he looked at his watch again and saw that it was now fourteen minutes before nine.

“Well well, since this squad runs by that chron, you are late. You know what the penalty for arriving late to barracks is,” Frane said.

“The penalty is doing guard duty,” Trance said. There were a few instances already of trainees that had been late and punished. This is not fair, Trance thought, as he knew that there were seven instances that Rex or one of his friends had come in late and Frane had not done anything to them.

“That is right Sonderson, guard duty. You have ten minutes to get in your training uniform and follow me.”

Trance glanced around the room. He knew that most of the room was on his side, yet he caught sight of Rex’s gloating face. Very well, he would take this punishment like a man. He went to his trunk and in five minutes he was dressed in his training uniform and waited to follow.

Frane was surprised. He had been certain that Trance would protest and make matters worse; however, here he was calmly dressed and ready to go. Okay, let him take his punishment. He led the way out of the barracks and hollered, “Lights out before I return.”

In minutes Frane led the way to the guard station and took Trance to the locker room. “Here, you will need to put this on,” he said as he indicated a very old and rusted set of armor.

Trance took a look at it and was stunned at how shabby it looked. Any arrow shot could penetrate this he thought as he inspected it. “Are you sure I’m supposed to wear this?” he asked incredulously.

“Are you questioning me? That is the armor you are going to wear. Why are you ashamed to wear this armor?” Frane said in a slight taunting voice.

“This looks really old and I don’t think it could hold up in any battle,” Trance said.

“What battle? Who do you think you’ll be fighting tonight? You are going on guard duty, not heading on some mission where you might come across a division of Boulthorian knights. Now get that armor on and I’ll get you checked in and set out to your station.”

Trance shook his head slightly and did as he had been directed. Next he was led to the guard’s armory where Frane handed him an equally old sword belt with sword and scabbard. Trance was then handed an ancient spear and a bow that looked like it could snap on his first bowshot and a quiver with arrows that did not look like they were in the best shape. Frane then went to a computer and clicked on it a few times entering information and then led Trance out to his station at one of the furthest guard towers from the barracks. Here Frane left him to stand watch till six EM, early morning.

Trance looked around the tower room and saw how sparse it was. The square room had twelve small windows, three on each of the four walls. He wandered over to one of the windows and looked out into the coming night. He never thought earlier in the day that he would somehow be late to barracks and have to serve guard duty for punishment. Okay, I’ll just make the best of it and show what kind of man I am.

He took a few minutes to review his comp pad to see what he was responsible for and what he was supposed to do. According to what he read he was to walk around the room at least ten times an hour and every hour on the hour he was to go to the intercom built into the far right wall and report into the main guard post. Just out of curiosity he compared his wrist chron, watch, with the comp pad. Huh, his chron was in sync with the comp pad. Then why was he so far off with the chron in the barracks?

This meant two other things to him. This may mean that he had not been late at all and that Frane had left him just five minutes ago. Strangely Frane had gotten on the intercom and reported right before he had left. Thinking back it had taken about close to ten minutes for him to get to this tower. He checked the pad again to make sure of what time it was and knew that he had seventy-two minutes before he needed to check in. After setting his pad down he made a couple laps around the room before stopping to get a drink of water from the sink in the corner of the room. He made two more laps and tried to time himself. Another couple laps and he took a few minutes to sit in the chair that was placed in the center of the room with a small side table set next to it.

Too bad, that he was only allowed his comp pad to read. To keep his mind occupied he reviewed more of what he was to do and read again the rules and reasons for the kingdom or planet to go to war. After making a few more laps he decided to check out the sword and drew it from the scabbard and somehow was not surprised that it was very aged, rusted and for the most part dull. Why would Frane give him these useless weapons? Did everyone who was punished with guard duty given these weapons? He consulted the pad and saw that if the trainee did not have his own armor or weapons that they would be given appropriate armor and weapons to serve while on guard duty. Who could think that these were suitable for this duty?

It was time and he checked in. “This is tower nine and all is well here,” Trance said.

“Trance is that you,” said a surprised and familiar voice.

“Yeah, it’s me. Is that you Zxane? I did not know you were here. Why are you at the forge?” Trance asked the older brother of his friend Gracer. Maybe this won’t be so bad if Zxane was the knight, actually even better a Golden Griffin, was who he’d be talking to tonight. In fact it had been Zxane that had signed him up into the Golden Griffins at the end of year tournaments.

“I got orders to come to the Forge and serve in the guard tower for the term of training. Then I get to go home for a couple months before my assignment of being a recruiter in Cator. Now why are you of all people serving guard duty?”

Trance took a few minutes to explain that he had gotten back from a date with Corena and that immediately after entering the barracks Frane came up and said that he was late. He included the fact that the chron in the room said that he was late. Finally he related that he had compared his wrist chron with the pad. “I don’t know for sure but I suspect that I was set up. It’s only a theory, because I can’t prove it. It just seems that all year Frane has been trying to get rid of me. Also, the armor and weapons that Frane gave me should really be cleaned sharpened or put in a museum.”

Zxane took a few moments to respond. “Are you sure the armor and weapons are that bad? I know Frane, and yes, it has been suggested for some time that he favors some of the least favorable trainees and takes it out on some of the best trainees to come along. Fortunately for me I was in a different barracks and my trainer was even and fair to all of us. I still can’t see that he would do this on purpose.”

Trance tried his best to contain his frustration and said, “Well I should let you go. You have other towers that need to report in and I’ll get back to walking my tower.” He clicked off and made a couple laps and sat down for a few minutes to process. Time never seemed to pass so slowly so he did whatever he could think of to space his activity and felt exhaustion creeping up on him. Only once before in his life had he stayed up all night and that was at a friend’s house ages ago back on Earth. That night they had been watching movies. Trance had surprised himself that night; he made it till dawn while his friend only stayed awake to two o’clock in the morning.

More laps and another drink of water later and he used the restroom before calling in again. He stretched and made a couple more turns. He stopped at one window for a few minutes to take the time to really look out and even looked up at the stars. From this tower he had an amazing view of the night sky and he was even able to make out three constellations. Fascinating, he thought as he focused on the constellation of the traveler. This constellation loosely resembled a person out for a walk or stroll. It seemed that everyone that looked at it thought they saw something different. Trance thought in a bizarre way that it looked like himself as he had been walking toward the Sparrow XIV, the global escape ship that he flew across the stars to arrive in the Andromeda galaxy and near Althora. He took a moment to even think of what he had learned from the news on how a Boulthorian battleship had attacked their ship, all of the passenger deep sleep chambers being expelled and the ship being destroyed.

The next constellation he spotted was the great lion. Trance looked in awe at this constellation and remembered that there were two interesting things about this constellation. One was that it was rare that it was in the sky with the traveler at the same time. Second, it was curious that in a few places on the planet it was referred to as the great ram. Strange that it could have both names.

During the night Trance took his comp pad and took pictures of his weapons and after a couple laps, he took the near useless weapons maintenance kit and started to work on his weapons. It took a while, but he removed most of the rust and he got the blade reasonably sharp. Then he set out to straighten the spearhead and sharpened it as well. Finally he was shocked to discover that instead of twenty-five arrows that he should have, there were only eighteen arrows in his quiver. Most of them needed the fletching trimmed and he was stunned that instead of being war arrows, they were target arrows. Great, he thought sarcastically, so he did his best to sharpen the arrowheads. If he needed to shoot them and aimed at the right place on his opponents armor one of these target arrows could kill.

While he worked and shortly after his third call there was a knock on the tower door and Trance went to check it out and found a knight with a tray of some cubed meat and cheese as well as some flat bread. He thanked the knight and took the tray and ate. A few hours later about midnight another knight brought another tray loaded down for dinner and finally there was another platter of snacks delivered. The meals certainly helped keep up his strength, and he found a few times to take a nap. At last he was relieved of his duty by a regular knight who looked very curiously at him. Trance left the tower and made his slow way to the main guard center and there happily met Zxane.

“You didn’t tell the whole truth,” Zxane said as he looked at Trance. “You know,” he said as he looked closer at the armor, “I think this is the suit of armor that was supposed to go to the recycling center two days ago. In fact I saw the document that was signed saying that it was going there. And those weapons, where did Frane dig them up from.”

“I have no idea. I just know that I am truly exhausted and by the book I can take the day and rest without any repercussions. It’s been great seeing you and talking to you last night. I wouldn’t have gotten by without your help. By the way, thank you for the food.”

“No problem. Just so you know you were supposed to get the snacks and meal. When I sent Tinn with your trays, he said he nearly had a fight with another knight that said he was to take you your meals.” Then in a much quieter voice, “Tinn said that the trays were loaded with near out of date stuff and not very much. I don’t know what is going on but I have to report this.”

Trance was about to protest, yet on second thought, let him report. That is his job and as his dad always told him, “You should never let anyone get away with doing something wrong. It is better if it comes out right away.”

“If you have to report it, then do your job. I’m heading to get this stuff off and go to the barracks,” Trance said and shook hands with Zxane and turned to go. Ten minutes later Trance sat in the locker room in his training uniform, the armor set aside, and he had his face in his hands trying to wake enough to stand and walk back to the barracks. He finally stood unsteadily and started out. However, he did not make it to the barracks then.

He was only feet away from the guard station when Frane came up to him followed by his squad and in a booming voice Frane said, “There you are Sonderson, I brought you your training sword. We are heading to the training field for training duels.”

Trance was about to protest, but something inside him told him to do it. This was going to give him more rope. He reached out his hand and took the aged and worn sword belt with its scabbard. He had grown fond of the aged training sword even though he could not wait to get his normal armor and arms. After strapping the belt on, he joined the squad.

“How are you doing?” Gracer asked.

“I’m okay. Your brother Zxane was on duty and he helped me out,” Trance said trying to suppress a yawn.

“That guy,” said Zam in a rough voice. “I would love to see him get his. And Rex, he kept talking about how much trouble you are in. He needs to have his rear handed to him again.”

“Yeah,” Mandor added. “I saw Rex talking to Frane yesterday. I don’t know if they are working together, but similar boots walk a similar path.”

Trance listened as his friends talked. I don’t think they know the whole story, he thought. It was great having friends like this. No matter what, they were on his side. They walked on and Trance saw that Frane was taking them to the furthest side of the training field. Okay, this is weird, why come this far if they were just going to do training duels. He looked around and suddenly saw that Rex and several of his new friends were not in the squad. Where was he? Then he spotted him over toward where Frane was taking them.

“Yes, and I’m the best swordsman to come along in years,” Rex was saying. “If it hadn’t been for some judges that did not like me, I would have won all of the swords competitions.”

“Oh yeah,” said Hamon, “I seem to remember that at the end of year tournaments that you got yourself marked and slashed and demoted due to un-chivalrous behavior.”

“As I said, that was because of some of the judges being jealous of me and my talent. For years everyone has said I was the best swordsman they have seen and all of a sudden some upstart shows up and everyone seems to think he is so great,” Rex said defiantly.

“Really,” said Trance. He was trying hard to keep his temper and knew he’d lose it eventually. “You know I have never claimed to be the best swordsman. It was by skill and determination that I won all of the sword events. I actually take comfort in the idea that there is a better swordsman than me here on base, and before you say anything it is not you Rex.”

“Is that so? I seem to recall that I had you beat in the swordsman challenge at the end of year tournaments and you ran around the field like a COWARD!” Rex gloated.

“Half true Rex, you brought the situation on yourself by accusing me of being un-chivalrous. And let’s look back at that, we had the whole field for that final duel. And yes you were able to knock my sword out of my hand. However, you keep failing to mention that you came after me, an unarmed opponent, and could not get the job done,” Trance said, feeling anger slowly surging through his system.

“Yeah, and that is when you ran like a scared squirrel,” Rex taunted again.

“Well not exactly, I ran yes, however, once again you fail to mention that I ran around trying to get to my sword. And what happened when I had it in my hand I eventually knocked your sword out of your hand. What happened then Rex,” Trance said looking at his adversary, curious to see how he defended his actions in front of a growing crowd.

“You came after me like I came after you,” Rex said, trying to make himself sound better than reality.

“You know that is not what happened. You seem to forget that there are probably hundreds of witnesses here on base that saw exactly what happened that day, and I have the film of that match. I’m sure we can set up a theatre here to watch it and see exactly what took place,” Trance said in an even voice. Then slightly louder, “For the record I sheathed my sword and allowed you to get yours before we continued and then I won, fair and square.”

Rex shook head and grimaced. He knew Trance was telling the truth, but he had his reputation to uphold. “You got lucky, that’s all. You are just like me and you know it. In all our matches you got lucky or you had help, that is how you kept winning except that one time I got you,” Rex said, savoring the memory.

“You mean in that castle event when we were dueling and one of your teammates tripped me and you struck me when I fell down. That is your one victory over me. Funny you beat me in a team event, and every time we faced off one on one I defeated you.”

“You are the luckiest sleaze. I am a swordsman that can defeat any of you and especially you,” Rex said, pointing at all of Trance’s friends and then at him.

Trance was focused now fully on Rex and felt he knew what was coming. This is not going to be good, he thought. “Rex, you are an excellent swordsman, but you have three horrible flaws that will get you killed someday. One, you are very heavy handed with your sword, two, you are too cocky, and three, and this will kill you, you are too aggressive.”

“Oh, is that so? Well there is nothing special about you,” Rex said, finally struggling to find something negative to say. He knew that Trance was an exceptional swordsman, a true equal to him. However, he proceeded with his plan and pushed further. “I can beat everyone here and I have beaten all of you. I can especially beat you now.”

Trance paused and tried hard to keep his patience, which was slipping away very quickly. “What would make you think that you can beat me?”

Rex smiled in a way that should have warned Trance of impending danger. “I have been studying you during practice and I know your every move. I know how you stand, hold your sword, and how you swing. When we were in school I didn’t get to study you and that is probably why you could beat me. Now I know you and I’m ready. Let’s duel right now. I challenge you to an unhanding duel right here.”

Trance had heard the term before. This was a duel where the goal was to knock your opponent’s sword out of his hand. His suspicion had been accurate. Rex had been baiting him for this very thing. There was another thing that tickled his brain, I’ll deal with that later, he decided. “So you’ve been studying me. Wow, I never thought you were that clever. Like I said I have never claimed to be the best swordsman here. And like you I have defeated nearly every person here at one point or another in a sword duel; however, I take comfort in the fact that there may be someone here on this base that is better than me. But you know what, that person is certainly not you.”

Everyone in the crowd sensed what was coming and started moving into a circle around them. Unseen by most of the crowd including Rex and Trance, three additional people joined the circle and stayed at the fringe interested and curious to see this play out. Rex was flexing his muscles while Trance did his best to stand calm. Hamon leaned towards his friend and whispered, “Trance, this is not a good idea. I have a strange feeling about this.”

Zam even approached him and said, “I overheard Rex with one of his buddies about getting you in a duel and that he really wants to hurt you.”

Mandor added, “By code you can back out now, if you accept you have to fight him till there is a winner.”

Trance suddenly felt his head swim. He was so exhausted he was not sure he could take on the worst swordsman on base. One part of his brain tried to get him to back out and let Rex fume, the other half was let’s get this over with. If you lose, well I can finally get some rest today. “Why do you want to duel me again? I know you’ll gloat to high heaven if you finally win. So this is it, if I duel you this is it, win or lose, we are done.”

Rex smiled slightly broader, “So you are challenging me to a duel.”

Trance smiled in return and said, “No, you already challenged me and everyone here heard you. So, I accept.” He moved to a proper starting position and waited for Rex.

This was perfect, Rex thought. Now he took his place in the circle and flexed one more time and casually placed his hand on his sword. “Excellent, on the count of three we’ll go. One, two,” and he drew his sword and swung right at Trance.

Trance was ready, but it took his exhausted muscles a moment to react. He just blocked the blow at the last moment and their swords had a loud clang. Trance took a mere step back and blocked three more blows. Clang clang clash went their swords. Trance’s hands stung from the blows. Rex was really coming on strong. He blocked more and more blows. Even though he was exhausted he felt his body coming alive as he defended himself.

“You can’t win. You’re too exhausted to keep this up,” Rex said as he swung violently.

“So this is why you wanted to duel me so badly. You probably altered the clock also. I must say Rex you're getting sloppy,” Trance fired back as he swatted Rex’s blow aside and he went on the offensive.

Their blades heated up as they crashed again and again. With more skill and determination both young men strove after each other. Rex felt his frustration building as Trance continued to block his blows and now he was on the defense. Trance felt the effects of his adrenaline wearing off and exhaustion was creeping in. This has to end soon or I’ll lose as I fall asleep standing here. Crash crash crash went their blades as the duel heated up.

They battled and moved for ten minutes as Rex swung harder and wilder and Trance with his skill blocked every blow and took the duel to Rex pushing him back. Suddenly Rex took a step and made a swift wide swing and Trance saw Rex’s relaxed grip and with an equally swift blow and Rex’s sword flew out of his hand and surprisingly stuck in the ground.

Hamon led the cheer as Trance’s friends went to celebrate with him. Trance felt elated for only a moment before he felt funny. He had felt the blow on his right side and didn’t think anything of it. Now his side was burning. He reached down and touched his side and then looked as his hand and confusion crossed his face as he focused on the scarlet. What the heck?

In a moment everyone saw Trance’s bloody side. The same confusion passed over many faces. Trane felt his knees suddenly buckle and Gracer and Zam raced over to keep him from falling down. Another figure moved at the corner of his vision and a moment later Jaymmol held up Rex’s sword and it was then clear to everyone as sunlight shone bright on the edge of the training sword. The blade had been sharpened and honed.

Chapter 14

Sundering

“Let me see that,” said a commanding voice. Immediately Jaymmol brought over the sword to the base commander who examined the keen blade. It had clearly been sharpened and honed all the way along the blade. Flecks of dirt and blood still clung to the blade. He looked over at Rex who was doing his best to look confused. “Frane, I want to see you in my office in ten minutes. You four,” Colonel Welton indicated to Hamon, Gracer, Zam, and Mandor, “Get him to the med room now and let the head doc know what happened. I will call him personally in just a minute. Hollen, take over this class, Jaymmol will come with me.”

After getting his wound cleaned and temporarily bound up, Trance had Zam and Hamon on opposite sides of him and together they began walking toward the med room with Mandor and Gracer. How and why went through his mind as the boys walked away. He looked back and saw Welton and Jaymmol talking and then headed off probably to the commander’s office and Frane meanwhile looked around disgusted and finally followed the two other men at a distance.

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Frane walked into the commander’s office and was directed to a chair. He looked around slightly and noticed Welton in his chair behind his desk where the sword lay and Jaymmol was in another chair.

“Okay Frane, what happened out there,” the commander said.

Frane took a moment to get his thoughts in order before responding. “You saw the same thing I did. Trance got into it with Rex and got himself challenged to a duel and he got solidly struck by Rex before Trance hit Rex’s sword out of his hand.”

“You are close to what happened,” Jaymmol said.

Frane looked furious at him, “That is what happened.”

“You forget, I was not that far away and I heard exactly what went down and Rex was the one getting on Trance and was the one to challenge for the duel. I thought Trance did an excellent job at keeping his temper. I don’t know if I could have done that before kicking the snot out of Rex. Now before we get into that, I want to know why Trance had sentry tower duty.”

Frane smiled and sat back before answering. “It is obvious, he came in late. I have it clearly documented.”

“All right, however, as I was reporting to the commander before you walked in, I checked the system to see when Trance checked in for duty and do you know what I found out.”

“Yes, you probably saw that I was correct in my punishment,” Frane answered.

“Actually I have the report here, and Trance reported for sentry duty at two minutes till nine, still early for curfew. I went back and checked the chron in the barracks and compared it with my wrist chron and comp pad and found for some reason that the chron was set an amazing thirty-two minutes ahead. How did that happen?”

Frane sat frozen in his chair. “I did not know. I will have the chron investigated.”

“That is being done,” Colonel Welton said. “I want to know why you did not check the chron out and why you did not double check with your wrist chron?”

“I did check my wrist chron and he was late,” Frane said defensively.

“That cannot be,” Welton said. “If Jaymmol can verify with his wrist chron that the barracks chron was off, then your chron would show the same. If what you say is correct then that is easy to prove, let us compare your chron with that of Jaymmol,” Welton said calmly.

Frane did not show his wrist chron; instead he folded his arms and sat back. “That is not necessary. What will that prove? Anyway, by rule, he walked in and by the chron he was late and he got the punishment that comes with that.”

“What you don’t seem to be grasping is that if the chron had been tampered with then he was not late and the punishment was not warranted. Now there is another matter. Explain to me why you had that young man dressed in armor that was supposed to have been sent to recycle and had been signed off for that,” Welton said firmly.

At this Frane began to sweat. “Uh, well, I did not know that. That armor was there in place for curfew breakers.”

“And the weapons that he was given. Okay, enough nonsense. You knew full well that armor was garbage and the weapons useless. If we had been attacked, that young man would not stand a chance. I saw his weapons, and I know them well. He spent a good portion of his time making them serviceable. I don’t want any excuses, you knew. And one final thing from me, I checked with the guard kitchen and they informed me that you had ordered some horrible disgusting food for him. That is it, therefore you are hereby demoted and you will be assigned another barracks. Your squad will be made up of Rex and his friends and some other riff raff that has been causing me more headaches this term. Now get out of my office before I make you wear that ancient armor permanently.”

“Actually commander I have one more item. During our investigation in the incident with the jousting device, we found that there was a twelve minute period between when you loaded the device and when you were seen with the device right before your class began. Now, Hollen and I have found that there is a path, not a clear path, but one nonetheless that the vid system has that would allow someone to pass to the jousting frame out of sight.”

“So, what does that prove? I did not have anything to do with the war lances,” Frane said angrily.

“It proves that you knew. That’s right, that twelve-minute period is the only time that the war lances could have been loaded and when you appeared at the device right before class you clearly looked in the second loading bay. You might not have put them there, but this clearly proves that you knew they were there,” Jaymmol said more angrily now.

“Frane, get out. I will see you to your new assignment in the morning,” Welton said as his own anger was fuming. After Frane left the room in a furious huff, the commander turned to Jaymmol. “I am assigning you to this squad for the remainder of term for them. Let Hollen know that he is your second.” He sat back and looked up, “I really need a drink right now. No, I’ll wait and let my temper cool. Tomorrow, you will be able to move into Frane’s room. Also get me a status on Trance as soon as you have it.”

“Yes sir,” Jaymmol said as he stood and saluted the commander and prepared to leave.

“Oh and see that Trance gets the rest and proper care that he needs.”

Meanwhile Trance was being examined in the med room. Shortly after arriving the doc came in and sent Hamon, Zam, Gracer, and Mandor out of the room so he could examine Trance’s wound. Trance took off his shirt and waited for the doc and a nurse to remove the temporary bandages. He couldn’t help it; he looked to see the deep gash in his side. Wow, Rex had really got him.

The doc gave orders and got another nurse in to help him and in a few minutes they had Trance sedated enough so they could really examine the wound and begin to clean without causing excruciating pain. Then starting at the deepest level of the gash and working slowly and methodically up, the doc sutured and stitched the wound closed.

Later Trance woke up in a quiet recovery room. He sat up and immediately felt the pain in his side. Instantly he eased down and lay still for a moment; however, that didn’t last long. He tried again and this time he raised his head up enough to look around. The room was clean and equipped with a few monitors that he was attached to. Looking at his arm he was surprised to see an intravenous needle and tubing connecting him to a couple medicine vials. His eyes roamed the room and he was slightly startled to discover that he was not alone.

Sitting nearby with her head slumped down was Corena. Trance watched her for a few minutes as her chest rose and fell in a regular rhythm. He even caught the sound of her ‘breathing’ as he called it. It touched his heart that she was here and he wondered how long she had been there as he continued to watch her. Suddenly she snorted and raised her head and opened her eyes and she smiled delighted that he was awake.

“How are you feeling,” she asked as she quickly stretched.

“I’m a ton better now,” he said as he tried to smile. Just then his side twinged and he grimaced. He gritted his teeth for a moment and tried to smile again. “Well my side might have a different opinion.”

Corena smiled before looking more concerned. “I heard all about the duel. I can’t believe that Rex really goaded you into a duel. And his training sword was not only sharpened, it was honed to a razor’s edge. How could he not know his sword was that sharp?”

“You’re right. I think he knows and is just trying to cover up. So what are they doing about this,” Trance asked curiously to find out how the investigation was going.

“Well Frane has been demoted,” Corena said for a start.

“Do you mean he isn’t going to be a trainer anymore,” Trance asked slightly excitedly.

“Not exactly, he has been demoted but he is still a trainer. He will be training at a new barracks and that is the other news. That barracks will have Rex and his friends and a few other troublemakers on base,” Corena said, trying hard to hide her delight.

“Oh, then who is taking over our barracks,” Trance asked curiously.

“Jaymmol and Hollen will be taking over. They are starting tomorrow.”

“Wow, oh I wish I could be out there.”

“Yeah, but you need to stay here and heal. You just got a very serious gash,” Corena said, trying to get him to lay back down.

Trance sighed and laid back. “Okay, I’ll rest. Thank you for coming, I really appreciate it.”

Corena smiled and said, “It’s my pleasure.” She stood up and approached the bed and in a moment leaned over and kissed him lightly on the lips. They parted and she sat back down and said, “We can do that more when you are healed. Now lay still and I’ll tell you more about what took place after you left the field.”

Trance listened patiently as Corena told all that she knew. Her squad had been out for a run and they were on their way back when the duel took place. As she was passing the field, Corena looked over and saw a large crowd at the far end of the field. Curious she had stopped and watched the crowd and a moment later saw the sword fly in the air and stick in the ground. As she watched she saw Jaymmol swiftly move over and lift the sword and even from the distance she had seen the bright edge.

“That is when I got Artem’s attention and got her to let us find out what happened and they had you on your way here,” Corena continued and referred to her squad’s trainer.

Just then the doc entered the room. “Hello Trance, Princess. Well my friend you had an unfortunate meeting with a sword. I know, you probably don’t want any humor, and that gash was not humorous. Let me get to the, pardon, point. We cleaned your wound out and stitched it up. I can see in your eyes the question you want answered most and that is I want you here for the next three days so we can monitor you and make sure you are healing. After that you’ll be released to your barracks with orders for you to only, and I mean only attend your classroom classes for the next five days. After that you can slowly get back to your usual schedule, so you will be able to get your armor with everyone else the following Ettenday,” the doc said.

Trance was surprised and happy at the same time. He had been looking forward to this coming Ettenday, what on Earth would be Monday, since he started training. Additionally this would be the start of the last month and a half of training at the Forge. “That sounds okay with me. Can I have visitors while I’m stuck here?”

“Yes you may. They will have to sign up and be approved by you so we can monitor everyone that comes to see you. We don’t want some disruptive influence to spoil your healing,” the doc said with a slight grin. “Just so you know you already have quite a few signed up on your visitor list and I’ll get it for you to approve at your leisure. Of course Princess Corena has already been approved. I’ll get the list for you and let you rest. And by the way, your family has been notified of this incident, your mother is very concerned and I assured her that you are doing well and will call in the morning.” The doc said with a wink and got up and stepped away to his office and a few moments later he handed Trance a comp pad and then left Trance with Corena.

Trance took a look at the list, as his smile grew wider as at the top of the list was Corena followed by Hamon, Gracer, Zam, Mandor, and Lamden. He was delighted that all of his close friends had already signed up to visit him. However, he suddenly caught sight of a few names that were definitely not wanted, especially Rex. “Why would Rex sign up to visit me? He’s the idiot that did this to me.”

Corena frowned also, “What, Rex signed up to visit you. Anyone that knows you would know that he is antagonistic to you. Are they out of their tree?”

Trance smiled more. He looked down at the list and with pure delight clicked on okay for all of his friends and not for Rex and his followers. Then he sat back and laid the pad aside and looked at Corena. “So what also took place today?” They talked for a while going over various classes and how excited they were about finally getting their armor. Some hours later Corena leaned over and kissed him again and headed back to her barracks and Trance did his best to lay back and close his eyes. Within minutes he was asleep and dreamed of being a Golden Griffin. However, the one thought that tried to foil this happy thought was taking the qualifications. Would his stay in the med room impact his archery?

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Ettenday arrived and Trance was trying to keep his excitement down as he got up that morning and went to the restroom. He washed his hands and looked at his face in the mirror. His hair was in need of a trim and he needed to shave. I’ll do that in a few minutes after I shower he thought before returning to his bed. It was still early and nobody else was moving in the room. As he lay there trying and failing to shut his eyes, his brain kept thinking about the coming day. Also his ears burned with the sound of snoring coming from four different beds. Great, a look at the chron told him that he still had half an hour before he would need to get up and start his day.

Exactly on time, Jaymmol and Hollen came into the room and turned the lights on and announced, “Everyone up. It is time to start the day. You have twenty minutes for showers and clean up, and I mean clean up. If you need to shave, get it done. This is one of the most important days for you here at the Forge. Your armor will arrive and be delivered here in exactly two hours and at that time we will teach you how to put it on properly and then we will join all of the other barracks for display day. Your weapons will also arrive today and you will begin to train with them at weapons classes starting today,” Jaymmol said.

“And remember, in two weeks we will be paired against another barracks for a mock battle, and we want you sharp and honed,” Hollen added.

Trance and the rest of the squad in the barracks rushed to the showers. Trance headed for the shower room and undressed and then got his gel soap and hair wash and he stepped into a shower stall and immediately the automatic jets kicked in and he was soaked. Swiftly he washed his hair and began to scrub the rest of his body with the exfoliating body sponge. He rinsed and stepped out and he heard the jets shut down. It took him just another couple minutes he toweled off and dressed in his basic uniform and then plucked up his electric shaver. Lastly he rubbed on an aftershave lotion and a glance at his wrist chron told him that he had only three minutes left.

The squad met back in the main room and moments later Jaymmol and Hollen led them out to the dining hall. After breakfast Jaymmol took the squad for a run that went around the base and back to the barracks. Five minutes later a large wagon arrived out front of the barracks and Trance felt his nerves rattling with excitement as delivery men came in and met with Jaymmol and Hollen who directed them to the proper trainees. Trance did not have to wait long, his armor was the fourth set delivered.

“Now I need you to get out of your uniform and the first layer you need to put on is the underlet,” Jaymmol said, indicating the pants and shirt that felt to Trance like a comfortable pair of long underwear. “Next you will put on the overlet,” Jaymmol continued, indicating the pair of cut resistant fleece pants and shirt. “And now you’ll start with the mail pants and hauberk and your inner belt.”

Like everyone else Trance put on his mail pants and shirt and was surprised by the weight. Not that his mail armor was heavy, but that it appeared that it was not as heavy as everyone else’s. Then at Jaymmol’s instructions he put on his boots followed by the plate armor that covered his boots and legs. His hands flew as he fastened the familiar looking straps and buckles. Then he assembled the plates around his midsection and his breast and back plates and sleeves followed by his fingerless leather gloves.

The last item left was his helmet that still reminded him of a motorcycle helmet that had a solid chin guard and a clear face shield and also a tinted shield that could be pulled down like sunglasses. Trance looked around and saw how everyone’s armor looked on them and was impressed. They all looked like proper knights. Wow, he thought, I’m almost there being a knight.

“Now before I have you put on your helmets, I need you to put on your surcoats,” Jaymmol commanded.

Trance pulled out his surcoat and put on the hunter green surcoat with the mountain lion embroidered on it. Then he followed everyone else and put on his outer belt with his eagle headed bowie knife dagger in its sheath.

“Everyone grab your helmets and follow us,” Jaymmol said and the squad formed up behind him and Hollen and they exited the barracks.

Outside Trance looked around and was impressed with all of the other squads in their armor and surcoats. He followed Jaymmol as he led them to the armory and they got in a massive growing line. The line moved swiftly as one after another trainee entered the armory and came out fully equipped with their weapons. Fortunately Trance did not have to wait long as their squad was close to the door. Looking ahead Trance did not recognize any of the boys from the squad ahead of theirs. It was strange that the boys ahead looked like a rough lot. Then as Trance entered the building he knew why.

Inside and almost ready to exit the building fully armed was Rex. What, this was crazy that the new squad for Rex and his rubes was allowed in before his squad. Trance was not surprised that Rex’s armor was etched with elegant filigree. He shook his head and followed the queue to the counter where full knights were checking lists and getting and handing over weapons. He did his best to ignore Rex as he waited patiently in line for his opportunity.

A few moments later Trance was at the counter and his heart raced as the knight checked his records. Trance could not help but notice that the knight made eye contact with Rex and looked down at his records and his finger was about to make a move when another person came up and placed a hand on the knight's shoulder. Trance could not help smirking when he saw the surprise in the knight’s eyes as he looked up at the face of the base commander. The knight then promptly went to the back and was immediately back with Trance’s sword in its scabbard, Viking style round shield painted hunter green, an axe that was as much tool and weapon, and a spear.

Trance undid his belt to slide it through the loop on the scabbard and refastened it. He took a moment to look at himself in a full size mirror. Wow, he had dreamed of this moment. Just as he turned around he heard Rex say, “Would you look at that armor? It looks light enough that a dart could penetrate it.”

Before Trance could respond Hamon came up behind and he looked at Trance and then at Rex. “You know, that looks like flight armor. No wonder it looks like it is lighter on you. And Rex, oh my, are you wearing a target. Any enemy will look at you and instantly think you’re important and sight you in.” Hamon then clapped a hand on Trance’s shoulder and with their friends stalked past Rex and the couple guys that he was trying to impress.

Outside Trance looked at Hamon and said, “Thanks. You look pretty good in your armor also and your hammer. I remember you telling me about it. That looks cool and lethal.”

Hamon hefted his hammer that resembled a sledge with a sixteen-inch handle. “Yeah, I think this will work just great. I have been dreaming of this moment, I can’t wait till we are in our first battle. Speaking of this, let’s see your sword Trance.”

Trance reached down and gripped the hilt and drew his sword out. A thrill shot through him that was probably the equal of Hamon, the difference being that Hamon had dreamed of wielding his hammer for a few years, Trance however had dreamed of being a knight and wielding a sword for eons. This was an incredible moment in his life. He had held a real sword before when he assisted in defending the Markem’s farm from the raiding Boulthorians.

The sword itself was exactly what he had envisioned resembling a Viking sword only with a two handed hilt and a slightly broader blade. He was impressed with the balance and weight. With his eyes focused on his sword he did not see the impressed looks from his friends. Just then a familiar and unpleasant voice hit his ears and he turned and was again face to face with Rex.

“I’m amazed that you were able to draw that sword at all. What a common looking sword, now this is the sword of a Golden Griffin,” Rex said as he drew his long sword. It gleamed with its shimmering etching and lethal edge.

Trance was impressed and not surprised by Rex’s sword. “I must say that is a really nice sword, Rex; however, are you sure you want to carry that as a weapon? It looks to me like a sword meant for a museum or for decoration rather than a combat weapon. Mine on the other hand is a combat weapon.”

Rex bristled and was about to say something more when Jaymmol and Frane walked up. “What’s going on here?” Jaymmol asked.

Rex sheathed his sword and said, “Nothing at all, just comparing weapons. Some of us have weapons that fit our rank.”

Trance couldn’t help it this time, “And some of us have weapons that we know how to use in combat. While others have weapons that I’d be afraid to clash with another weapon, let alone armor. Rex, you have a nice sword.” He turned and headed off with his friends and he missed Rex reaching for his sword only to drop his hand at a look from Jaymmol.

The following day Trance and his squad found that their weapons classes were getting more focused on them qualifying. He was certain that his swordsmanship was excellent as was his skill with his ax. Every day he knew he was getting better with his spear with scores that would easily allow him to qualify. Archery seemed to remain his one weapon issue. There were times that he shot a great score, and then there were times that he scored just out of qualifying.

Week after week the squad practiced their individual weapons skills as well as working as a group. Trance was resoundingly voted squad captain. His officer training was now coming together for him as he led his squad onto the field in mock battles with the knights stationed at the Forge. The first couple battles the squad was easily crushed by the professional knights; however, after each defeat Trance learned more and continued to improve his strategies. One other thing he learned was evaluating his squad and evaluating their skills.

This was an important skill, learning the talents of his squad. With each battle Trance not only refined his strategy to give the squad a better chance to win, and he would position his team mates in a better position for them to have success. This, it turned out, was a very important skill. As each team member was more and more successful, the squad was finally able to defeat the regular knights. Deep inside Trance could not help but count down the days till the battle between his squad and Rex’s. Day followed day and he applied more and more to learning various strategies and skills to improve his squad’s chances.

The day finally arrived and Jaymmol came into the barracks to deliver some news. “I have just been to the field and saw the schedule for the upcoming battle with Frane’s barracks and we are the second battle. I want you in your armor and arms in twenty minutes then we’ll head to the field to await our turn.”

Trance followed his squad to the lockers and in a couple minutes he was putting his armor on and this time he suddenly noticed his hauberk. He had been wearing the mail shirt since it arrived and he had not noticed the side. “Hey, what is this,” he said to Hamon who was next to him. He held up the hauberk and let Hamon look at it.

It took Hamon only a moment to realize what Trance was referring to. “Oh, yeah, when you get seriously injured they put an extra layer of mail over the location of your injury. So since Rex slashed your side they got the information and added this extra layer for extra protection over that spot.” Hamon handed the hauberk back to Trance and both young men continued to dress in their armor.

Now in his full armor Trance grabbed his training weapons and bow and arrows. Nerves hit him as he walked up and began directing his squad to line up. He couldn’t explain why he suddenly felt nervous, in school he had led his team onto the field and into mock battles before. Now it felt more real and serious in a way. After the team was lined up, Jaymmol and Hollen handed each team member an electronic box much like the ones that they had worn when in school in those mock battles.

The box was smaller and fit on their belts and had a series of lights on them to represent how much damage and wounds they had endured during the course of the battle. Green was good, blue was taking a couple hits and still good, violet was taking some punishing blows, yellow meant that in a real battle they would be bleeding, orange was that they were grievously injured and in need of medical help, red was dead. Trance attached his device to his belt and he tried valiantly to get a calming breath. “Okay, you all know what is at stake. Guard each other and let’s show Rex and his squad how a real professional squad is to operate. Like we have been working in our battles, cover each other and stand tall. Do not let them intimidate you, and lastly, be of excellent courage,” he said bravely.

“Stand firm for this squad and be chivalrous out there, ‘Till the breaking of the sky,’” Jaymmol added. In a moment he led the way out and to the training field.

Once there, Jaymmol stepped aside and let Trance lead the squad to their starting place and there across the field he saw Rex at the back of his squad and yelling out orders. Trance noticed that Rex’s closest friends were on either side of him. Okay, well I have defeated you before and you don’t seem to learn, Trance thought as he saw Rex’s familiar alignment.

At a subtle signal both squads marched toward each other and Trance led his team. From the rear of his squad Rex directed his squad to march and had his archers in the front ready to drop and start shooting and in a moment he gave the command to shoot. Trance responded and gave orders for his team to raise their shields.

Then Trance gave the order that his squad was waiting for. The archers were in the front and each one was covered by a spearman. At the right moment half of the archers stood and took careful aim and fired a volley of arrows at the nearest opponent to them, a moment later the remaining archers stood and fired arrows at their targets. As the two squads continued to approach each other, young men on both sides fell as arrows flew in both directions. Trance used his bow also taking aim at one opposing knight after another until his quiver was empty. Then he raised his spear and he prepared to collide with Rex’s squad.

“Forward and do not spare anyone. Ram them and run them down,” Rex nearly screamed. His squad leaped at his orders and in a mad fury they bolted from their positions and raced at Trance’s squad hoping to break them up.

Trance was prepared and had his squad with the spearmen in the front line up in a wedge formation with Trance himself at the point and waited for the collision. Bam, one of Rex’s swordsmen ran right into Trance’s spear, nearly knocking it out of his hand and knocking him down. Trance recovered his footing and maintained his hold on his spear and waited as another opponent rushed at him. The sound of clashing weapons crashed on his ears and after he threw his spear at a nearby knight taking him out Trance drew his training sword and was dueling one knight after another. Suddenly he caught a glimpse over at Jaymmol who is signaling him. Trance immediately steps away and into a no confrontation zone and looks to see what Jaymmol wants.

“Do you need more men to join you?” Jaymmol calls out to him.

Trance frowned, that is a weird question. What does he mean? Not sure and confident in his squad Trance shakes his head no and leaps back into the battle. As he defeats another opponent he notices that one of the lesser swordsmen is in trouble. He dashes over and aids the young man to defeat his opponent and with renewed courage the man turns to his next opponent bravely and gives his best effort. Trance notices another man in trouble and steps in to take what would have been a killing blow on his shield. The opponent was surprised and backed up allowing Trance’s squad mate to defeat his opponent.

Trance engaged and defeated another knight and had a moment to strangely notice that his squad was dwindling; yet Rex seemed to have more men. He did not have time to dwell on this when four men rushed at him. With skill he turned to them and battled the young men, defeating each one in turn. Hardly had the fourth man fallen and limped off the field when five more opponents rushed at him. Great, Trance hefted his sword and moved to stand against them. As before he engaged them and gradually he defeated them.

Two more groups of opponents swooped in on Trance and he was starting to feel exhausted and he knew immediately what was going on. Rex was really trying to eliminate him, and where was Rex. Trance defeated another opponent and looked around and saw Rex hanging back and directing his men, not at just fighting the battle but sending them directly at Trance. And soon Trance realized that the men coming at him were from other squads, not just Rex’s. How is this? Very well, “Squad rally near me and let’s make our stand,” Trance called out.

With only a third of his squad left, Trance knew that his squad could not win with the force that Rex was directing now. So, if we can’t win then for sure we will drive straight for Rex and I’ll take him out. His squad may win, but Rex will not enjoy it. Trance took the lead standing straight and strode forth. His training sword blazed as it clashed and slashed against one opponent after another and as each man fell away and more joined the fray he could spy Rex’s face, and that face was showing fear and frustration.

Rex kept holding back his best men and directing everyone else right into Trance’s sword. I’m winning yet he keeps coming. Maybe I need to end this. If I defeat him now, once and for all to see, his men will fall apart and be picked clean in no time. “Let’s end this match right now. Everyone forward and do not spare a single man!” he yelled and strode straight for Trance.

Trance saw him coming and defeated one more knight before Rex raised his sword and Trance took the blow on his shield. Blow after blow fell on Trance’s shield until breathing heavily Rex took a step back. Trance took the moment and raised his sword, made his move and got Rex by surprise on his sword and they took position and clashed their swords. Sparks flew as their swords connected time and again. Trance was so focused on battling Rex that he lost track of his electronic box and how much damage he had taken.

His hand was beginning to sting as their swords connected again. Trance prepared to take another blow and return a blow of his own when out of nowhere an arrow flew toward him. Instinct took over and Trance dodged the arrow as it flew past. The momentary distraction cost Trance as Rex saw his opportunity and with glee made the fatal swing, and the box on Trance’s belt blared and the red light glowed. Dang, Trance stepped back and with grace in defeat turned to leave the field.

With his back suddenly open to Rex, Trance did not see Rex stand and raise his sword; however, before Rex could deliver another punishing blow on his unsuspecting victim, Hamon charged up and slammed his hammer into Rex’s chest. Rex fell holding his chest and trying to catch his breath and his box blared and went red. Hamon took the lead for a few moments and directed the squad before he fell. The battle only lasted for a few more minutes as Trance’s best squad members bravely gave their best efforts but to no avail. In the end however not one of Rex’s original squad was left and in their place were the remains of the six squads that had joined him.

With a bruised chest Rex stood and prepared to congratulate his squad when he noticed the base commander approach. His smile broadened, so the commander came to congratulate me, at last that Earth boy is in his place.

“Well done. What a magnificent battle. First let me congratulate the victorious squad. Rex you directed your men with precision and excellence, you have learned well on how to direct a battle. Trance you and your squad fought valiantly and bravely. Even when you fell, Hamon took command and continued in your stead keeping your battle plan intact. In fact I saw four others take up command and kept your strategy going, and to be honest your strategy was working, you simply did not have the numbers which gets me to the point of this battle,” Colonel Welton said with more than a hint of sarcasm.

Rex turned to the crowd and saluted them. This is great; he is about to honor me. He turned anticipating more praise when he was stunned with what was said next.

“Rex one day you will be considered a great captain; however, that is not today. You had one squad to compete with and you were directing them into disaster and you hung back and flung your men recklessly after one knight. Yes, I am very aware of your rivalry. So with your squad dwindling and facing certain defeat you were offered another squad and another and another till six squads were fighting for you and yet as they came in you still hung back and flung more and more men at Trance,” Welton said as his face flushed with his rising anger.

Frane came and stood by Rex and boldly spoke, “And what of Trance. Did he not come straight toward Rex with the intent to bring him down?”

“That is true Frane, but that was near the end of the battle and I assume that Trance knew that he could not win at that moment. Now speaking about Trance, when he was offered the services of the other squads, he turned them down. Why, I don’t know, he probably has his reason, but that is not the point. The fact remains that he refused and stuck with his squad and they did eliminate all of your squad Frane. It also can’t be denied that Trance, unlike Rex, took the front and led his men. He directed from the front of his squad and came to the aid of his men that were in trouble. That makes him a much better captain, a much better man. Now from that Trance, you win this day, go celebrate with your squad. Frane, I want to see you in my office now,” Welton said and turned to leave the field.

Cheers went up from Trance’s squad and their supporters as Rex and his squad and the squads that assisted him howled with rage. “How dare he deny my victory? This was my victory, my squad no matter how many joined, we won,” Rex screamed.

Trance stood humbly as he was patted on the back and congratulated. His mind buzzed with joy and confusion. He knew the bitterness of defeat at the hand of Rex, however, he rejoiced that Hamon and his friends fought bravely for him and proved their loyalty. The remnants of the six squads that assisted Rex had no loyalty to him; they simply wanted to be on the winning side. Trance waited as the field cleared and in curiosity he wandered to the field and to the spot where Rex had beaten him. He stood at the spot where he had fallen and bowed his head in humble prayer.

Lifting his head, he suddenly had a thought. He turned to stand and face the way when he and Rex stood there at the end. The arrow, where had it come from and where had it gone? He pivoted and looked around. Ah, I was standing here, he thought, and the arrow had to come from there. Now that means that it flew there and he went walking in the path the arrow must have taken. To his surprise he spotted an arrow stuck in a tree. How is that possible, it should be a training arrow with a dull round head? He reached out and gripped the arrow and pulled it from the tree and stood feeling alone looking at an armor-piercing arrow. Again, he looked around at the area as regular knights and trainers were clearing the field and moving the squads out to set up for the next battle. What was going on?

Chapter 15

Threads of the Web

Aboard the Brazen Beak in a conference room Thazz sat with his top officers facing the vid screens. His insides were burning with frustration, as he faced the faces looking back at him from the vid screens in this conference. One screen contained the live image of King Axlor, the second screen was Bazar, the third had King Hunratuuth the Sphinx King, and the fourth contained Dew the spy. Thazz had just relayed his failure at the Temple on Arias and now everyone was waiting for King Axlor’s report.

“Vengethor is ready to lead the raid on Serenth your Highness. As you know I have ordered an increase in raids on Althora. We are hitting them at random intervals and random locations to keep them off balance. They can’t tell when or where we will hit, only this time we have a specific target in mind. This time I think our information is more reliable than the information we had on Arias,” Axlor said.

Thazz bristled at his failure again and tried his best to control his emotions and just let Axlor speak.

“My scholars have been studying the legends and carefully researching them and we firmly believe that there is some clue at the cathedral of Serenth to the location of the sword,” Axlor said confidently.

“Oh,” Thazz said and could hardly contain his sarcasm, “So what kind of clue do your scholars say is at the cathedral.”

This was Axlor’s time to bristle and his cheek twitched. “According to the legends, there is either a painting or tapestry at the cathedral that shows the location of the sword.”

“Really,” Thazz said, his voice dripping. “Will the painting or tapestry say, ‘The sword is here?’ What if it is just a forest scene, how will you know for sure where the sword is located?”

Axlor had not expected this and growled inwardly, his cheek twitching more. “It is said that the picture, painting or tapestry will have enough detail in it that it will be easy to know where the location must be. Our plan is for Vengethor to raid the cathedral and do a search for the picture, retrieve it for study. When we have the exact location of the sword we will transmit the location to you so you can pluck it from its hiding place. Another game piece for us.”

Before Thazz could respond King Hunratuuth spoke up, “That sounds excellent. When do you expect Vengethor’s raid to take place.”

Axlor sat straighter before answering, “He is ready and his ship is two days away from his target. I know that he and Roamer are eager to get on the ground. He has his instructions to contact me the moment the picture is in his hands.”

“Excellent. I look forward to hearing that Vengethor has the picture whether it is a painting or tapestry. Also make sure that he knows to slay every knight that comes up against his group, don’t leave any of them alive,” Hunratuuth said in a relaxed commanding voice.

Axlor was slightly stunned. He had taken countless orders from the Sphinx King, and killing had never bothered him. He could not count the number of Althorian knights he had put in graves let alone the knights he had slain from other worlds. “Sire, you do know that there are four divisions of knights in the city along with the sheriffs,” Axlor said as he tried to keep a business-like exterior while his mind reeled at the thought of those two hundred and forty knights. What a grim task.

“Is there a problem,” Hunratuuth asked. “I wouldn’t think that was a problem for you. Remember that this command comes from on high.”

Axlor did his best to sit still, his cheek twitching again. “No, there is no problem. I will make sure that Vengethor follows through. One small question, what of any civilians that may get in the way?”

“If any civilians get in the way they are no better than the knights. One last thing, you are certain that your son has no knowledge of the true prophecies,” Hunratuuth said with slight concern in his voice.

Axlor felt himself bristle slightly, yet one memory haunted him and he had to do his best to hide this. He had never shared that incident from Vengethor’s childhood with anyone, and certainly the Sphinx King should never hear of it. “To the best of my knowledge, Vengethor is ignorant of the true prophecies. On my life he shall never know them and we will be victorious long before that.”

“Wonderful, I will hold you to that. Now let us hear from Dew and how he is doing with his new mission. Dew, how have you been doing,” Hunratuuth said, now moving the conversation to a hopefully more positive report.

Dew’s picture and voice were still altered and pixelated. Of course that was how Thazz and the others saw him as he continued to hide his identity. The only one that knew his real identity was Bazar. He took a moment to collect himself and then he spoke, “First off I would like to say that our plan for Princess Corena is moving right along. Like expected she is excelling in her training and will certainly be accepted as a Lady Golden Griffin. I have no doubts that she will continue to excel and will be made captain of her own squad. I am doing my best to influence where her squad will be stationed. Should all go well, she will be stationed at the Pikes Head Rook outpost.”

“Frilth, do you know how dangerous that place is,” Axlor blurted. “That outpost is one of the closer outposts to the palace at Caldora, and it is on a hill with one side guarded by a cliff. How are we to assault and take that place, it has never fallen to our hand before. What makes you so sure we can take it this time and get the princess?”

Dew took a moment to collect his thoughts before continuing, “I can assure you King Axlor, this time you will succeed in taking the Rook and capturing the princess. Now even though there is the cliff on one side and only two ways into the outpost, I have a couple agents that have assured me that when you arrive you will have an easier time. They will see that the side gate will be minimally guarded and easy to open. Also, even though this Rook is like you said fairly close mileage wise to the palace, the main road up goes around and approaches the main gate from the east rather than from the west so when the attack commences it will take reinforcements twenty minutes longer than if we arranged for her to be stationed at Fortan Keep.”

Axlor sat back and even Hunratuuth seemed to relax more and stroke his neat and tidy beard. Bazar even nodded his approval, while Thazz watched the conference screens and waited for more information. Dew knew he had made the impression he wanted, this was fantastic; however, he knew that what he was about to report would not go as well.

“All right, Dew do have more to report,” Hunratuuth asked confident that there was more good news to follow.

“Yes Sire, I have one more report and this is not as planned,” Dew said, not sure how his news would be taken. “I have an issue I have been trying to resolve. That is the suitor to the princess. This Earth boy has become an irritant that needs to be removed.”

“The boy we have heard rumors about,” Axlor asked surprised that this should be an issue.

“That is right. I don’t know why, but I have a really strange feeling about this boy. Things would have been much easier for us if Corena had maintained her relationship with Rex, but due to his unreliability, she broke it off. I am personally baffled by her choice of this boy Trance. Since hearing about him and seeing him in person at the end of year tournaments, I have enlisted a certain asset that has been hunting him. So far the hunt has been unsuccessful, I have no explanation of this, the asset is a remarkable marksman with his bow. There is something more, he seems to be protected at the Forge.”

Thazz clicked his beak and tilted his head taking this in. “What possible threat can this boy from Earth be? Even if he becomes a Golden Griffin he is only one knight, what could he possibly do to us. It is the sword that we need and our plan is in place to take the princess and victory will be ours.”

Dew responded, “I’m not entirely sure. From what I saw at the end of year tournaments, this boy will be a very dangerous knight. He is not only very skilled with the sword, he can motivate men to follow him, and that could be more dangerous to us. To be honest, I have a very odd feeling I cannot shake. I have been urging my agent to hasten his hunt and put this young man in a grave.”

This indeed did not sit well with Hunratuuth. He said, “If it will help, tell your agent that he has orders from on high to end his hunt soon. Also add that there will be a fabulous reward that will be presented to him when, what is his name, oh it doesn’t matter, end his life and let’s get on with more important plans. Now I think we need to hear from Bazar, what do you have for us.”

Bazar was ready and began, “Thank you Your Highness, may all of the galaxy be under your hand soon. I am here to report that our scholars and I have been studying the vid scans that Thazz had taken at the temple on Arias. We are in the process of getting a complete translation of the glyphs inscribed on the walls. There is a lot that we have learned; yet there are certainly words missing so we are researching numerous other texts to aid us in filling in those words. I ask that you grant us more time, there are a lot of sources we are looking into to get the best translation possible.”

Thazz spoke up to add, “My birds and experts are in constant communication with Bazar and your scholars. They are researching our sources to add to yours. We are confident that within a few weeks we’ll have the best translation and immediately after we will have all of the pieces to have victory.”

Hunratuuth smiled before speaking, “That is excellent. You have all the time that you need. We must have no mistakes. Any mistranslation is inexcusable.”

“There are no mistakes so far. Soon the Griffins and everyone else will be under our hand,” said Thazz confidently.

“Very well, continue the good work and keep me informed of your progress. Now one last item, has anyone noticed or learned more on the Griffin General,” Hunratuuth asked.

Everyone looked down and for a moment nobody spoke. Finally Thazz said, “I have been away searching for the Talenth Stone so I have not been able to direct my efforts to that pursuit.”

“Ah, that is understandable. Continue in that endeavor. Axlor, have any of your knights noticed or heard anything about the Griffin General or anyone that may come out as such.”

“No your Highness, I have thoroughly questioned my knights after every raid they have conducted. I will instruct Vengethor and Roamer as they raid Serenth to pay attention for any news that may be connected to the Griffin General.”

“Thank you. Now everyone I leave you to your tasks. Good day and may the might of the dark one give you guidance,” Hunratuuth said and a moment later he disconnected from the conference.

Onboard the Brazen Beak Thazz sat back and rubbed his beak with his talon as the screens went blank. Very interesting, he thought, Hunratuuth is worried about the Griffin General. Well once the sword is in my hand that threat is nullified. He reached out and tapped a button on his console and the inboard kytherum popped up and Veen appeared on screen.

“Well Veen, have you learned more from the scans from Arias,” Thazz asked.

Veen was ready, “Actually yes Thazz, I have found a couple words but I don’t know if they will help you. I will keep at it. One strange thing, Eluce leads some of his followers to a galaxy flowing with milk. Also I found a place that mentions a capstone but nothing more about it, not even what the capstone is for.”

“All right, keep at it and let me know,” and Thazz shut the kytherum down. Well some progress is better than none.

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Vengethor and Roamer were in Vengethor’s private room onboard the Quarvalian Horn. On the kythersig was the face of Axlor and he looked more serious than Vengethor had seen him in a very long time. “Are you alright father, what has happened.”

“Nothing has happened. I have instructions from on high. When you assault Serenth, you are to slay every knight that rides against you, leave none alive,” Axlor responded grimly.

Roamer shifted uncomfortably, “Sire, are you saying that we are to intentionally kill all of the Althorian knights that are stationed at Serenth.”

“Yes Roamer, that is exactly what I am saying. And those orders come from on high,” Axlor answered. He could see in the young man’s face his own inner reaction to the order.

“Father, Sire, what about any civilians that may get in our way, are we to slay them as well?” Vengethor asked curiously.

Axlor felt for his son, but he had to carry out the orders he had been given, “Your orders are to find and retrieve the picture that reveals the location of the sword, and slay every Althorian knight in the city. If any civilians get in your way, then they will have the same fate as that of the knights. I know this is a hard order, but as I said, this order comes from on high.”

Vengethor and Roamer looked at each other and then looked back at the screen of their kythersig and nodded that they would follow their orders. “Good,” Axlor said and the screen went blank.

“I wonder what brought that on,” asked Roamer.

“I don’t know. I will go instruct our men and get them ready. Take the afternoon to relax, I feel that we won’t be relaxing for the next few days,” said Vengethor as he stood and went out his door.

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That very evening in the dark cathedral of Serenth two hooded and robed figures met. They took a moment to look toward the front of the grand chapel. They could clearly see in the dark the three podiums and the table of invitation. The table contained three-branched candelabra; two sets of four offering trays and a large fairly simple ‘X’ called a cris. Up above the table and set in the wall was an elaborate stained glass window. The two figures tilted their heads to gaze at the window.

Both figures were about the same size, their only distinction being that one of them had a light grey cloak and hood. The other wore a dark brown cloak and hood. It was the figure in the light grey cloak who spoke first, “Sir, I did as you asked and I believe that we are the next target of the Boulthorians attacks.”

“I knew we would eventually be on their hit list. Go and alert our members and tell them to prepare. We evacuate in two days,” said the figure in the dark brown robe.

“What, do we flee and leave the town and the knights to an awful fate? Why don’t we stay and help them,” light grey said anxiously.

“No, we leave in two days. We can not be found here, it is not the right time,” dark brown said and raised a sleeve with a hidden hand. “Before you say anything more, I know that this will be a huge tragedy when the Boulthorians arrive. However, more lives will be lost if we are found here at this time. Now do as I have asked, I will speak to the captain of knights and advise him so maybe not so many knights or civilians will suffer. We will speak later about our final plans to leave and where we will go.”

“I will obey,” light grey said in his submissive male voice. “One more question about the picture, shouldn’t we do something about it.”

Dark brown paused and folded his arms before responding, “I think the picture will be safe. We will remove as many portraits and tapestries as possible, but the one you refer to has remained hidden and in plain sight for close to three thousand years. I don’t believe that the Boulthorians are intelligent enough to see what they want to see. Now it is late and we both need rest, the next two days will not be restful.”

Chapter 16

The Fires of the Forge

Jaymmol stepped into the barracks and watched the young men in silence for a few moments. He noticed some seemed to be sleeping peacefully, others rolled in restless sleep no doubt anxious for the qualifications to begin. Not so curious, the young men stirring the most were Trance and his closest friends. Jaymmol felt a swell of pride that these young men had the best shot of qualifying as Golden Griffins. He was proud of Trance. This young man had not only worked extremely hard on his own weapons skills, he had relentlessly worked with his team on their skills.

He knew that his squad had worked hard and would give all of their efforts to qualify. The same could probably be said for the other squads on base; that is except the new squad under Frane’s direction and led by Rex. Jaymmol had seen them practice and only Rex was prepared to qualify as a Golden Griffin. Rex would probably get in anyways due to his father, that was okay, everyone would know. At least Trance and his friends will be known for trying hard and getting in on their own merits. He looked at the chron and decided to go to his office for another ten minutes and let them rest.

Trance tossed and turned his dream troubled. He was still concerned about his archery. He couldn’t explain it, he was feeling more comfortable, yet there were still times he would not get the required seventy five points. Another thought came from nowhere and seemed to dominate his thoughts. Corena had taken him to the museum recently and there was an artifact there that fascinated him. It was a curious stone covered in ancient writing and the plaque said the stone was from the planet Talenth. He remembered asking Corena and a museum worker and no one seemed to know where Talenth was. There was no planet in the galaxy by that name. How could the stone come from a planet that didn’t seem to exist? Yet here it was and for some reason it was dominating his dream. Where had the stone come from, what was its significance, and mostly why did he have a strange familiar feeling of the stone.

It is now the month of Oxteen, which is the second month in the season of Auburn and the traditional qualifying week for recruits to either advance to Golden Griffins or move on to train as a regular knight. Jaymmol took a moment to stretch and he thought about what was ahead of this group of excellent recruits. They would get the next two months off, the months of Nothemtree and Fallow, and then the new knights and Golden Griffins would start training again for eight months starting with the first week of Reep, the last month of Auburn, to the last Ettenday, Monday, of the month Sheefent the second month of Winter. Well that was the future and he was in the present and he now needed to get the recruits up so they could be ready for the drawing that would determine the order of the squads to qualify for each weapon.

“Good morning recruits, all up! Let’s go. We have a busy day today. Come on, feet on the floor, let’s move, you have qualifying. Trance I need to see you in a minute. Sneckals open them eyes, it's time, up you get,” Jaymmol called as Hollen entered the room to assist.

Taking a look around, Hollen spoke up to help get the squad up. “Sneckals, you heard Jaymmol, open your eyes it is time to get up. Come on everyone, we don’t want to be late for the drawing.”

Trance immediately opened his eyes and for an instant he thought about closing them again. He had been on the verge of remembering something about the stone when Jaymmol’s voice entered his hearing. With a serious yawn and a stretch he started to move and got up. He needed to get dressed and find out what Jaymmol wanted. In minutes he was in his nicest training uniform and went to Jaymmol’s office.

Jaymmol trusted Hollen to finish getting the squad up and about and ready to go while he spoke to Trance. He waited and after Trance entered the office he closed the door and went to his desk and consulted his comp pad. “All right, first I want you to know how proud of you I am. You have really performed well in all of your practices and our training battles. It also looks like your weapons scores are right there except archery and I’m sure you know this. A good thing is that archery is three days away on Feerantday. I shouldn’t do this, but I have scheduled you a couple hours of archery practice tomorrow so take advantage of that. I want you to succeed and you’ll be an excellent Golden Griffin.”

Trance smiled. This was great; he would definitely use the extra practice time for his archery. “Thank you, I'll use the time wisely.”

Jaymmol stood and walked Trance to the door and once in the main room again he called everyone to attention and began to get them lined up to go to the practice field. Moments later he and Hollen had the squad on the way to the field and to their appointed spot. Leaving Hollen with the squad, Jaymmol went to the front and joined the other squad trainers, including Frane, to draw from the churning randomizer cage with blue hollow balls that had a slip of paper with the number printed on it.

Fourteen minutes later Colonel Welton took his place and called the drawing open. One by one the squad trainers reached in the cage and pulled out a ball, opened it and read out the number. Immediately on the field’s message board, with a grid of positions, the squad’s number would appear showing everyone which squad got which position for qualifying and which spots were still available. Jaymmol was the fourth trainer to draw and the cage stopped rotating as he stepped up and he opened the door and reached in, selected a ball, and opened it. He took the paper out and read, “Squad three gets position seven.”

Trance shrugged; that was okay with him. That would give him a little time to watch a few of the other squads to see how qualifying would go. He turned his head and saw that Hamon had the same expression on his face. He turned to look back where the cage was and saw Corena’s trainer step up to a second randomizer cage and reached in to announce that her squad was in fifth position. Mentally Trance was excited he would get to see Corena qualify in the stands before needing to get ready for his own qualifying.

The board filled up as trainer after trainer came up and drew for their squads. Then it was Frane’s turn and Trance nearly choked as his squad got third position. Instantly his head swung and he could not help groan at Rex’s gloating face. How could this happen that that squad of un-chivalrous boys would get to qualify before him. Trance shook his head and did his best to relax. Evan though he was fairly confident in his abilities, he still took a moment to lower his head and humbly pray for guidance in the qualifying events.

After the last trainers stepped up and took the last places Colonel Welton the base commander took the podium to address all of the recruits, “Ladies and gentlemen, you are now poised for the last step in the forging process. Let’s see how you have been tempered. Most of you will easily qualify and make excellent knights. Some may even just qualify to be sheriffs and other law enforcement. Some of you may pursue positions in the naval forces, and the elite will advance to the level of Golden Griffins. Don’t let your trainers down, don’t let me down and show the fruits of your hours of practice and always be courteous and chivalrous.”

Minutes later the squads were released and the first squads to attempt qualifying went to get ready. Trance followed Jaymmol and his friends to the stands to see how the qualifications took place. As he took his seat he looked out and saw what looked like two obstacle courses were set up. In moments the first two squads approached the starting lines. One squad was the first female squad, the other was the first male squad.

“Oh I see,” Trance said as he watched the first female storm the course with a mace and a few minutes later she finished and her score was posted on the board. Immediately then the first male recruit charged out and took his ax and viciously attacked the course. Back and forth the squads went until the last competitor finished. Then there was a ten-minute break before both squads traded places and the ladies used their axes and the young men used the mace.

The last recruit made his run and there was a twenty-minute break for the next two squads took the field and once again the ladies started with the mace and the young men used the ax. They traded places and continued. Next up for the men was Rex’s squad and Rex took the field first. Trance could not turn away and was shocked as Rex savagely took his ax to the course. Not surprising Rex scored the fourth highest score and certainly qualified with the ax.

Trance did his best to look anywhere but at the field as many of Rex’s squad qualified with the ax. The last young men went down the course and there was the ten-minute break and Rex again went down the course, crushing his way to another top score with the mace. Great, Trance thought, Rex was easily on his way to qualify as a Golden Griffin.

The next two squads took the field and more high scores were recorded as well as some very low scores and Trance was startled as three young men and five young women fell to their knees in tears, as they had not qualified. Corena’s squad took the field and as expected Corena nearly broke the record high score for the mace. When she again took the course this time she did set the course record for the ax as she easily qualified with both weapons. Trance was ecstatic about her results and knew she was a sure in for a Lady Golden Griffin.

The next squads took the field and Trance found he was more relaxed. He had been slowly studying the course and thought he had most of it figured out. Immediately after these squads finished Jaymmol called the squad up and led them to the locker room to get in their armor and get their ax if they had one or grab a spare. Trance took his ax and was soon leading his squad to the course. Shortly after they arrived at the start of the course the first young woman took her mace and at a signal from a course official she took off.

“Trance, get ready, you’re up next and the first guy,” Jaymmol said. “Remember I have faith in you. Just focus on what you have been practicing all year and you’ll be fine.”

Trance took a deep breath and once again prayed silently that he would have the focus and stamina to run the course. Soon he was at the starting line and then he was off. He ran as fast as he could down the course and approached every target that was presented to him. Expertly he took blows on his shield and then dealt deadly blows to the automaton targets. His ax swished this way and that through a particularly packed area on the course. Strange he thought, he didn’t remember this many targets. Oh well just keep going and get through. Finally he spotted the last target automaton and the finish line. This target seemed more aggressive and sunlight seemed to really gleam on what was supposed to be a dull ax head. Trance took the blows and a moment later he dealt the target the fatal blow and he raced ahead to the finish.

As he stood at the finish, bent over and desperately trying to catch his breath, he caught sight of Jaymmol and a few officials having a meeting. He took a moment and looked at the scoreboard and looked for his score. Shouldn’t it be posted already, why was it taking so long for it to post.

Hamon, Mandor, and Gracer approached and stood by Trance as he continued to wait for the score. “I wonder what’s taking so long. You did an excellent job and in pretty good time,” Mandor said.

“Yeah, this is strange. I know you didn’t set a course record, but your score should have been posted already,” Hamon added.

“I know you qualified for sure,” Gracer said, “I got to see how my brothers qualified and you outscored them.”

Trance looked and Jaymmol was finally coming toward him and nodding. He looked up to the scoreboard and finally his score popped up and his friends yelled in elation. However, he could still hear Rex and many of his squad screaming and yelling in protest. Clearly he had qualified, but still there was the question, what was the delay. “Jaymmol sir, what was the delay in my score?”

Jaymmol approached and with a gesture he signaled Hollen to keep some of the squad back, they didn’t need to know. Obviously Trance’s close friends were right there and they would know anyways so he spoke, “I’m not sure what happened,” he said and glanced deliberately in the direction at Frane, “But someone set the course to maximum. That isn’t the only thing; most of the officials don’t want this to get out. Someone put real sharpened axes out there in the hands of the targets. They could have done some major damage. Whoever did this knew how to stay invisible. Now, there has been a discussion that since the course was at max and not what it should be, that your score does not count. There is a president to this and by the rules your score counts. You should be proud, you easily qualified, congratulations.” Jaymmol patted his shoulder and signaled Hollen again. “Hamon, your next get ready, the course should be normal for you. Grace be with you.”

Trance breathed easier and watched Hamon take the course with his ax and solidly break the course record. Still breathing heavily, Trance tried to process what Jaymmol said and watched as Mandor went down the course. His brain came to a stunning thought, whoever had tried to shoot him with an arrow, and then tried to get him killed on the jousting field, had just tried again. Gracer’s turn on the course and Trance did his best to root for his friend as Gracer outscored him by two points. Zam took his turn and tied Trance’s score and the rest of the squad had their turns. Soon it was time for the squad to prepare to attempt to qualify with the mace.

Trance was up first and took a mace that was much like a baseball bat. As he made his way through the course this time it seemed at least to him that the automaton targets were not trying to kill him and it seemed that the course was actually shorter than when he had taken the course with his axe. After he had crossed the finish line this time he felt better about his score. Sure enough it popped up a lot sooner than his ax score and this time he paid more attention and saw two letters after his score.

“Jaymmol, what are the letters for after my score. It says ‘GG,” Trance asked.

Jaymmol looked up and spotted what Trance had asked about. “Oh that. It means that your score qualified you for the Golden Griffins with that weapon, congratulations. If you notice there are a few recruits with the ax and now with the mace that also scored that high. Also if you look there are people that only scored just high enough to just be a regular knight, notice the ‘KT.’ I also see some that must have chosen to be pawns, and at least four that may only qualify to be sheriffs,” Jaymmol explained.

Trance was delighted that so far his friends had scored in Golden Griffin range. Unfortunately he also noticed that Rex and a few of his friends had also scored well. Figures, at least he could relax for a bit and root for his friends and the rest of his squad.

After the last squad member had run the course Jaymmol gathered up the squad and escorted them back to the locker room and again they went to the stands. They spent the rest of that day watching the remaining squads take on the course. The last squads took on the course and after the last recruit ran the course Jaymmol led the squad to the mess. After dinner he led them back to the barracks for hopefully a good night’s sleep.

The following day Trance and his squad watched as the first squads took the course with a variety of weapons. For the first time when he took the field he scored only at knight level with the mace and chain. Most of that day the squads attempted to qualify with a variety of weapons. Of them Trance only qualified with the halberd in Golden Griffin level. It was then that an announcement was made and for once qualifying came to a halt.

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“The news this morning is shocking,” said the newscaster. Trance was stunned by what he was seeing. He was in the mess with his squad along with most of the base when the news broke and everyone was silent as the news reporter continued. “This raid by a division of Boulthorian knights has been the most dramatic and deadly to date. As we have been reporting the Boulthorians have increased their raids and many people believe that war is on its way. Up to now King Maximus has repeatedly said that he will not declare until the Boulthorians do something particularly heinous and he declares that he upholds all military law.”

“I think this breaks the law,” a young man shouted from across the room.

“This morning at approximately a half past four a full division of Boulthorian knights assaulted the town of Serenth. The local knights and the sheriffs rode out to try to protect the city and were overwhelmed. Unlike most raids by the Boulthorians, this time they slaughtered the knights, sheriffs, and many in the local militia.”

Trance couldn’t believe what he was hearing. What would cause the Boulthorians to assault this way? He knew that King Axlor was determined to try to conquer Althora, and the raids had increased. However, the raids had not been this violent.

“One of the survivors of the city has reported that this division was led in fact by Vengethor and that the focus of the assault seems to have been the cathedral. It has been long rumored that there is a picture at the cathedral showing the location of one of the legendary swords,” the broadcaster continued. “It is not known what sword the picture depicts, but the speculation is that it is the Lion Sword. Also, there is no information on the picture or the possible location of the sword. As most people know the Lion Sword is associated with the prophecies of the coming of the Griffin General, and the finding of this sword is directly connected to this person.”

“What’s he talking about,” Trance said as he turned to Hamon.

“Well most of us know, there were three swords forged in ancient days for this war. They were the Lion Sword, the Falcon Sword, and Excalibur. I remember you telling me about Excalibur in your legends from Earth. I don’t know if that is the same sword. What is important is that whoever finds the Lion Sword is probably the Griffin General. And, parts of the prophecies have been fulfilled already. Who knows, we may live to see the coming of the Griffin General,” Hamon said.

The newscaster continued, “So far the death toll is a staggering one-hundred and sixty. More reports are coming in and the death toll is probably going to go up. There is a lot of damage to the cathedral and it has not been confirmed if Vengethor led this assault. If it is confirmed that he was the leader of this assault, that is tantamount to an act of war.” In the background was footage of some obviously injured knights and several buildings on fire. Then there was a shot of the front of the cathedral and its famous stained glass window still intact despite the damage to the building.

The room went silent with shock as several survivors were interviewed. Trance was stunned as more reports of the assault came to light and the death count continued to rise. What were they there for and why all the carnage this time. It didn’t make sense, and if the report was accurate, why was Vengethor there? As yet that report was still being treated as rumor. One additional report came up, it seems that all of the artwork and documents had been removed from the cathedral the day before and nobody claimed to know anything about who had removed them.

Later that day the qualifying resumed and the schedule was adjusted due to the terrible events at Serenth. Not surprising nearly everyone qualified with his or her daggers and battle daggers or short swords. Trance was nervous and excited to qualify with his spear. As he went down the course there were a couple times he was sure that something was wrong. It seemed that the pike he was to use on one target was slightly shorter than it should have been, and the target for him to throw spears at was slightly further back. In the end he got his qualifying score at Golden Griffin level.

The next to last day of qualifying was for the sword and for one Trance was certain that he would qualify. Nearly as expected, Corena set a new record for ladies with the sword. Trance and his friends deeply groaned as Rex nearly strutted after setting a new high score for the young men. Trance did his best to relax as he waited for Jaymmol to take them to the locker room and then to the field.

Trance had that strange feeling he sometimes got when he was at school last year and ready to start a competition. It was an odd calm feeling of all things. He knew how the course worked and he was ready. Jaymmol walked over and directed him to the line and gave him a confident nod. Trance took his position on the line and got ready, his right hand ready to reach for his sword hilt. He saw the signal and immediately took off and in a swift blur he drew his sword and went after the first automaton target. One by one he dealt blow-by-blow and dealt death to each one in his efficient manner. The last target came into view and once again he had that odd sensation as the automaton came after him. With grim determination Trance clashed with the target and with a swift backhand stroke removed the target's head. Breathing heavy he made his way to the finish line and sheathed his sword.

Trance was bent over trying to catch his breath and did not see his score post but knew he must have scored very high due to the exultant cheers and congratulations of his team. “What an amazing run. Just look, you just reset the course record with the sword,” Jaymmol said, patting Trance on the back. Trance finally looked up and to his surprise he had outscored Rex by five points and three points off what was considered a perfect run.

With a deep breath of relief, Trance knew that was three of his weapons that he had qualified with. Now there was the last day and his last weapon. Tomorrow he had to pass archery.

The morning dawned and Trance was feeling more nervous. He had taken the extra archery practice that Jaymmol had arranged for him. In a way he wanted to wait for his turn to qualify, and then he could not wait and wanted it to be here now and get it over with. Every few minutes he prayed, not that he would have success, he prayed that he would have the calm to draw his arrows and carefully aim and shoot. That was what he could control and let the arrow fly and hit where it should.

The first squads took their positions and Trance saw that they were set up in pairs, two young women and two young men. It was as though the two young men competed against each other while they were individually trying to qualify. It seemed to take a while but eventually it was Corena’s turn at archery. Trance could not contain his excitement as Corena nearly scored a perfect session. Her seventh arrow hit a nine so close to being her seventh bulls-eye. She closed by scoring three final bulls-eyes.

Trance rode the high of celebration up to the time for Rex to take his first shot. Almost arrogantly Rex took his first shot and to a stunned crowd he hit seven. It seemed to get worse for Rex as he tried desperately to shine with his final weapon that each arrow almost scored what he wanted and he was not making up enough points and in the end he scored seventy-three, knight level. Well to him that was okay, the bow was not one of his four weapons that he needed to qualify with and he was already qualified. Before he went to watch and root for his squad Rex took a meaningful look at Trance.

Well, not such a bad day, Trance thought. Pair after pair and squad after squad and Trance felt his nerves tingling. Not long now, and in moments he was in the locker room and almost unconsciously put on his armor and took up his bow and quiver of ten arrows. Now Jaymmol was guiding him to the archery field. Finally his moment had arrived and he was up with Hamon.

“Aim carefully and good luck,” Hamon said to his friend and together they drew arrows and aimed for their first shots.

Trance groaned as his first shot hit six and he heard the laughs and screams from Rex and his squad. Okay, just relax and let them come. Eight was his second shot followed by another eight. Shot after shot and he kept climbing closer to what he needed. The last arrow and his score was sixty-eight. A seven would get him what he needed, so with a deep calming breath and a memory of what Corena had told him about aiming he drew back his final arrow and everything seemed to become silent. Now, he released his shot and watched not knowing that he was holding his breath as the arrow flew to the target. A moment later his squad swept him up. Nine, he scored a nine and qualified with seventy-seven. Suddenly a disturbance was breaking out and Corena was running out of the stands toward the archery field.

Trance was busy beaming, but paused as Corena joined Jaymmol and the field officials. “Someone moved his target back. It was not at forty yards. If you check you’ll find that someone has moved it to forty-five yards,” Corena was saying.

“That means his score doesn’t count and he fails,” said Frane from a short distance.

“Let me check the rules,” said one of the range officials and he pulled up his comp pad and took a few minutes to read. “Well it is here and is clear.”

“Then he fails this course and will have to train here as a knight,” Frane gloated.

“Actually on the contrary, it states here that if the recruit scores the necessary points at a distance greater than the required forty yards it also counts and he gets an additional five points. Therefore Trance does qualify with the bow and I will put my name on his documents as he moves toward the GrindStone to be trained as a full Golden Griffin,” the official ruled.

Now with true exaltation Trance let his squad and Corena cheer and congratulate him. Now he could truly relax. His squad finished and to his delight Hamon, Gracer, Zam, and Mandor all qualified to join him in training to be Golden Griffins. Also in a surprise, Lamden also qualified. The spoiled apple was Rex and four of his friends would also be training as Golden Griffins.

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In the palace at Caldor in the throne room King Maximus and eight of his top advisors sat at a conference table discussing the tragic events of Serenth. Then Maximus received a call on his kythersig and got the news he had been waiting for. “Your Highness, I am delighted to report that Corena has easily qualified as a Lady Golden Griffin,” said Colonel Welton, the base commander of the Forge. “Also as you requested, the young man Trance has also qualified with his four weapons. Till the Breaking.”

“Till the Breaking,” replied King Maximus. He then turned to his advisors. “I don’t know who got that rule passed for Golden Griffins to have to qualify with four weapons, but they are stupid. It has worked for over a thousand years for Goldens to qualify with three and after the events of Serenth; we are going to need more Golden Griffins. Let the Legislature know that I want that rule revoked for next year. Also I want extra battleships in the space around Althora. These raids need to come to an end. I don’t want a war in my lifetime, but if Axlor continues on this course war is what he is going to get. God be with us and bring us peace,” he said and they all nodded in agreement.

“We will do our best, Highness,” said the advisors.

“Excellent. Now if you’ll excuse me I have a call to make,” and with that Maximus pulled up his kythersig and called to congratulate Corena.

Chapter 17

Trumpet Call

“He waits and then rises. Out of many his adoptive people, the humblest of Griffins to take his place at the call of the trumpet,” recited the tall and graying minister from the Althorian Bible. The passage was from the book of Marioth in the Ancient Testament.

Trance sat and listened with his friends at the advancement ceremony for the knights moving forward to Golden Griffin training. Trance remembered the passage and simply thought it referred to a great Griffin; however, he was starting to question that thought. He turned to Zam who was sitting on his left side and asked, “Do you know who the passage is referring to?”

“Yeah, it’s referring to the coming of the Griffin General,” Zam said.

“My dad thinks he may be coming soon. Remember last year all of the news about the first sign of his coming,” Gracer added from his right.

“Who knows,” said Mandor looking around, “He may be somewhere among us.”

“Yeah Mandor, it’s even possible that it’s you,” Hamon joked as all five boys laughed and looked around.

“That would be okay with me,” Trance said. “I just hope it isn’t Rex. One certain thing that rules him out is he is not a humble guy.”

The minister continued to talk about service and duty and concluded with a blessing. A couple other speakers came up and addressed the recruits and their families. Trance got a true surprise when his family arrived yesterday afternoon on the mule train. The Markems had come with them. His happiness and delight went sky high. He will never forget their surprise when he introduced them to Princess Corena.

“Oh my your Highness, I knew you were a beauty, but you're truly stunning. Trust me you have a wonderful man that loves you,” Mrs. Markem said and winked at Corena.

Corena had blushed and with pure modesty replied, “Thank you so much Mrs. Markem. I have heard so much about you from Trance. I owe you so much, you don’t know. You honestly have my eternal gratitude. If there is anything at all I can do for you, please do not, and I truly mean this, do not hesitate to ask me and I’ll do everything I possibly can to do it for you.” Then she leaned over conspiratorially and added, “Yes, I know I have an amazing man in love with me and I love him just as much.”

Trance still felt his face heat up at the memory. He did not hear exactly what had been said, but he had a significant guess. He tried to turn his mind back to the ceremony just as Colonel Welton was introduced. While the base commander talked about the attributes of the recruits this year Trance looked around at the recruits moving forward. He wasn’t sure but it seemed that between a fourth and a third of the base was moving forward to take the Golden Griffin training. In his mind he recalled Kyle telling him that just because someone makes it to start training to be a Golden Griffin does not make you a Golden Griffin. You still had to complete the training and ascend Ezra’s Tower. However, Trance wasn’t really sure what he meant, as Kyle seemed to joke about that.

Then Colonel Welton started introducing his staff and the Forge’s trainers. With building excitement the thirty Lady Golden Griffin trainers and sixty male Golden Griffin trainers, all but one were Captains, Frane was now a First Lieutenant, were introduced. Trance had heard that there was wagering going on to guess who would get into which training group and who would be the first Lady chosen and first male Golden to be selected. Not surprising most people still thought that Rex would be selected first, and for a certainty everyone knew that Corena would be selected first.

Silence fell as the first Lady Captain of the Lady Golden Griffins stepped forward to announce her selection. “The first lady selected and will train in Gold Squad is,” it seemed everyone held their breath and the only sound was the call of a trumpet before the name, “Princess Corena Jeul Astorene.” Trance could not hear anything as the whole assembly seemed to be screaming their pleasure as Corena rose and strode to get a parchment scroll from her new captain and returned to her seat. With a glance the entire royal box was standing and applauding, even Prince Mixim was clapping excitedly for his sister.

Next was the first male Captain who stepped up and from the ground shaking screams to utter silence he paused before speaking, “The first young man to train as a Golden Griffin in Diamond Squad is,” now his pause went on for what seemed far longer than necessary and again the trumpet sounded before, “Terrance Scott Sonderson.”

For a moment Trance could not sense anything. What had just happened? Few people knew his birth name. Most of his squad, in fact most everyone used his treasured nickname as his name. It did not escape him in the few moments after his name was called that a lot of people looked the recruits over trying to figure out who had been named. Hamon finally elbowed him and with his other three best friends got him to stand. Not since Chorus Markem had found him in his deep sleep chamber and assisted him to stand after flying in a suspended state for uncounted ages from Earth to Althora had his legs felt this unsteady. So this is what it means to have jelly legs he thought as he carefully stood and made his way to the raised platform and toward the podium. His unreality continued as he shook the captain’s hand and accepted the parchment scroll.

Something clicked in his brain for a moment and before he left the platform he stopped and looked up at the stands and time stood still as two of the most important women in his life stood side by side applauded with tears sliding down their faces. He did his best at that moment to smile and barely noticed that he had raised a hand. Then as he turned and was about to carefully take the steps down and return to his seat he spotted the love and adoration on Corena’s face. He did not think his legs could get any hobblier.

It seemed to take twice as long for Trance to get back to his seat as the next Captain made his pick. He was surprised to hear Lamden called second. His cheers rose with his friends. Still curious that Lamden was second and not Hamon, certainly better than Rex, and a glance over and Trance had to suppress his feelings as Rex sat there with his friends getting more angry by the moment. Two more captains picked before the Nickel Squad finally picked Rex. Trance found he was choking back and attempted polite applause while Rex did not hide his displeasure and frustration and he nearly yanked the parchment out of the captain’s hand. Oh, you just got what you asked for, Trance thought.

More and more captains were picked and still none of Trance’s friends were picked. Trance kept wondering why. Then the captain that had chosen him was up again. “My second pick is Hamon Waldron.” With a great deal of relief Trance cheered for his friend. Suddenly Trance had a thought and he had to wait and see if he was right. Sure enough one of Rex’s friends got in his squad. All the captains had their second pick and now they got a third pick and Trance and Hamon both stood and cheered and were losing their voices as Gracer would join them. By the time the selections were over all four of Trance’s best friends were in his squad and Trance was even happy for his friends Lamden and Orazior, they wound up in the same squad. Of course Rex got his friends as well.

The ceremony ended and everyone was then invited to a massive banquet in honor of the new Golden Griffin recruits. In the massive mess hall Trance and his family along with the Markems went to a long table to sit down with the families of his friends Gracer, Hamon, Zam, and Mandor. In his mind Trance had figured that Corena would sit and eat with her family and the base commander at the head table. He had just held out a chair for his mother when he sensed something different, everyone had stood up and was silent and he at first thought they were looking at him. Strange, until he had the feeling that they were actually looking at someone behind him. His mind just drew a blank as to who it might be that would trigger this reaction. They wouldn’t look this way if it were Rex for some bizarre reason.

He paused for only a moment more and slowly turned and felt his face burn and he could only guess at the shade of scarlet. Standing very close to him was Corena who was making a funny face and behind her stood her parents, King Maximus and Queen Kayna along with Corena’s brother Prince Mixim who was trying to look important. “Uh,” Trance started. There were times like right now that Trance was so struck by Corena that it was like his brain shut down and all he could do was stare for a moment before coming back. “Hello,” he said as he glanced around. What should I say next? Finally he said, “Would you like to sit with us?” Okay they are probably just passing by and wanted to say hello or congratulations; however, surprise King Maximus actually responded.

“Well thank you. I think we will join you,” and Maximus looked at a surprised mess hall attendant. “I think we need another table set here.” At this request the attendant stopped for a moment in surprise and then leaped to and moments later he and another attendant put an extra table to the one most of Trance’s family and friends were at. Not Surprising King Maximus took the head seat with Queen Kayna to his right and Corena on his left. Trance was on Corena’s other side with his mother, Eileen, on his other side. Mixim was not too happy being on his mother’s side. Everyone stood and waited for Maximus to take his seat and immediately everyone relaxed and got drinks and started getting food and visiting. Trance was always amazed that Maximus and Kayna were so personable and easily talked with everyone and especially his parents.

The banquet seemed to go on for hours on end. People got up and moved around and many people came over to visit with their table and see the King. Even Colonel Welton came and sat down with Trance and Corena for a few minutes. Finally the party feeling started to die down and slowly everyone got up and started to leave. The recruits went back for a final night in their current barracks while their families would head to the local Inn’s for the night. When Trance got to his bed, it took him hours to finally get to sleep.

The next morning, Jaymmol came in and congratulated the entire squad and directed those that would be back in two months to continue training as knights. Shortly after, he gave Trance and the squad members moving on to be Golden Griffins their instructions for leaving and to be prepared to arrive on time at Gaffordsville two months from now. To all he left orders for them to pack up and clean the barracks from top to bottom.

Their armor, weapons, and horses would be taken to Gaffordsville that was sixty miles east of Caldora and one hundred and seventy miles to the west of the Forge. The plan was that Trance would join his family and friends to catch the mule train to Caldora and from there they would go to their homes for a much needed break. With one last look around Trance lifted his baggage and headed for the door with his friends.

Within two hours he finds his family and the Markems in the royal carriage with the royal family. To his surprise King Maximus surprised him. “I think we need to play that game you introduced to us on the flight to the end of year tournaments.” At that moment Trance was directed to a table with the most expensive and elegant chess set he’d ever seen. Trance was stunned and almost didn’t want to touch the pieces. They looked like they should be displayed and never played with. He looked at Maximus nervously and with a nod from the King, Trance sat down and moved his first piece.

With a growing smile King Maximus sat across from Trance and made his first move on the chessboard. While they played the game, Corena and her mother Queen Kayna sat and visited with Eileen Sonderson and Maxine Markem. Heather and her friends Martina and Margaretta went to a corner to have a girl talk. Trance’s friend Martin Markem took a seat next to Trance and watched the game and could not believe that he was sitting across from the king. Sammy and Prince Mixim found a quiet corner and played games on a portable comp game. Evan Sonderson, Trance’s dad, and Chorus Markem went to another corner of the train car and sat and talked.

A different group of Golden Griffins was security for the royal family and Trance missed Major Marlett. Maybe his troop was on another mission for the king. These Golden Griffins were polite; still it wasn’t the same. At one point Maximus tried to get the major to play a game of chess and the man declined.

Corena played a game against her dad and then she and Trance had a very strategic game. Trance was delighted that he had introduced them to one of his favorite games from Earth. Corena got the checkmate just as the train rolled into the station at Caldora. The Golden Griffins then came up and set up to escort the royal family from the royal car. While the bulk of the troop surrounded the royal family there were a few that were assigned to escort the Sondersons and Markems.

All three families made their way across the station to waiting carriages with drivers waiting to take them to the most luxurious hotel in the city for the night. “Oh my, I don’t know if we can afford this,” Mrs. Markem said as she was helped out of her carriage when they arrived at the hotel.

“This is a gift by the royal house,” replied the driver as he also assisted the Markem girls step out of the carriage.

Chorus and Martin came out on their own and Chorus whistled and waved a thank you salute to King Maximus. The king waved back and continued with his escort into the hotel. The Markems and Sondersons followed and walked up to the front desk. Surprise clearly showed on the clerk's face as King Maximus approached him. “Hello young man. I have reservations here for three rooms. They are under…”

Just then the manager rushed over to assist the still in shock clerk. “Yes your Highness. Let me take a look and we’ll get you in.” A moment later the manager said, “I see that you and the royal family have the King’s suite on the top floor. The Sondersons have a suite three doors down on the top floor and next to them will be the Markems in a suite as well. Oh and of course the Golden Griffins will have the rooms between the royal family and the Sondersons.”

Moments later the manager was directing bellhops as they came hurrying up to collect the luggage and lead the way to the elevators. The royal family and their escort of Golden Griffins took the first elevator and were followed shortly by the Sondersons and Markems. Trance was looking forward to relaxing tonight and heading home. When he entered the hotel room he took a moment to stretch and went out on the balcony to just take a deep breath as he gazed out at the city.

He was always surprised when he was in the capital city, mostly looking at the various buildings. It was fascinating the mix of buildings from some that resembled medieval, gothic, and renaissance among buildings that were what he considered modern skyscrapers. There were quite a few that were like multi-storied Spanish villas. There were even some he had nothing to compare them to. Like always he was curious about what each building was and what the rooms were like. Were they apartment buildings or businesses or business headquarters and how many people were in these buildings? As he looked he realized he was facing west and yes as his eyes took in the city he focused on the main castle, the home of the royal family.

The royal palace was modern renaissance with a touch of gothic in appearance. He knew that the current ruling family would live in the palace and that the King’s main executive offices were there. Also based at the palace were the two most prestigious Golden Griffin divisions as well as the top four knight divisions. There were also offices for the top leaders of all of the other military divisions from the planetary navy to the space fleet to conduct operations. I have to make it to have a chance to get into one of those divisions. If memory serves, Trance had never heard where Major Marlett’s division was based. Maybe he would find out, there was no guarantee he’d make it as a Golden Griffin let alone having the chance to be selected into Marlett’s troop.

“Hey, are you okay,” Eileen asked.

He turned to look at her and saw her smile, yet there was concern in those eyes. “Yeah mom, I’m okay. I just need a little fresh air,” Trance said, doing his best to reassure her. He looked back out and sensed her walk up to him. Unbidden, a doubt crept in and he could not shut it down. “What if I just got lucky with my last arrow? What if I don’t make it as a Golden Griffin?”

“Hon, you did your best and earned this opportunity. I am very proud of you and if you don’t make it as a Golden Griffin you will be an excellent knight. Anytime that you start to doubt, you know you can always call on me or just pray,” she said and gave him a comforting hug.

“Thanks mom. Love you,” Trance said as he hugged her back. “I think I’ll take my stuff to a room and relax for a few minutes.”

“All right, oh and remember we have been invited to have dinner with the royal family and the Markems,” Eileen said.

“Yeah, I remember,” he replied. Just as he was about to step back into the suit he felt someone watching him. Trance and Eileen turned and there standing at her balcony was Corena watching them.

“Hello,” Eileen said, waving at her. She patted his arm and stepped back and entered the suit.

“Hi,” Trance called over.

“Your mom is right,” Corena said as she called over to him to make sure she was heard. “You just have to trust your instincts and you’ll do fine.”

“Thanks. I guess I over think sometimes. Just one more thing, I wonder who has it out for me,” Trance said, finally expressing what he’d kept back.

“I don’t know who or why. Just remember, you made it this far and I believe that you’ll be a great Golden Griffin. On your archery you have to block everything out, even thoughts about me. If you are in the middle of a competition, qualifying, or God forbid in a battle, you have to put all thoughts about me aside or you’ll lose your focus and that will be that and all of us, your family and me, we lose you forever,” Corena said trying to pull him out of his doubts. “Look I love you and let’s not talk about that tonight. I want us to have a good time and just enjoy our dinner and time off.”

“That makes a lot of sense. Thank you, I love you so,” he said as he felt the flame in his face. “You’re right. I can’t wait for dinner.” And with that he entered the suit and went to prepare.

Chapter 18

Bolt in the Dark

The two-month break just seemed to fly by. Trance had tried his best to enjoy each day at home with his family. One day he had taken Sammy to the arcade in town and the pair had a great time playing the various games and enjoying each other’s company. Another day the Sondersons went to a motion picture show. There was even one day just two weeks into his break that Trance found himself out shopping with his mother and sister.

“Come on Trance, tell me how I look,” Heather asked as she stood in a new dress at a clothing store.

Trance was standing with his mother and trying his best to keep from yawning. The dress did flatter his sister’s shape, yet did he really want to think of her at a dance wearing that. It didn’t reveal much, but little was too much for an older brother. “I think you look great,” he knew what she wanted to hear and he smiled at her and his mom, however, inwardly he thought about how to destroy the dress or intimidate anyone that took her to the dance. Probably the leadership at the Golden Griffin camp would frown on that.

At the same store Eileen tried on a couple dresses and Trance and Heather were both excited for her. It had been a long time since Trance had seen his mother this happy about buying a new dress. She didn’t dress up that often and he for one thought she deserved to treat herself. “You look fantastic mom,” Heather said, voicing her opinion.

Trance found a nice shirt that he thought Sammy would look sharp in and one for his dad. For a short while he thought he would escape and not get anything, to his mind he didn’t need another nice shirt. However, it seemed to drive his sister and mother crazy and they seemed to conspire against him and find him a nice shirt as well. Of course Heather had to find some shirts that were totally wrong for him. She seemed to delight in finding shirts that had in his mind embarrassing patterns on them. At last Eileen stepped in and found a really sharp blue shirt for him.

A week later Trance wore his new shirt on a date with Corena, one of his most precious memories of his break. They went to an exclusive restaurant and attended a concert of the Royal Cator Symphony. Tonight he felt slightly more nervous. There were times dating Corena that he was nervous simply because she was the beautiful princess of the kingdom and there were times that he noticed that they were being escorted by four to seven Golden Griffins. Now four Golden Griffins wearing dress uniforms escorted them to the restaurant and to the symphony.

At first when he had started dating Corena, Trance had been really nervous when he noticed the Golden Griffins with them and worried about what they would do to him if he was not a gentleman and a proper suitor for Corena. He had a feeling that at first the Goldens, as they were sometimes referred to, were curious about him and ready to step in at any indiscretion; however, they saw what a gentleman Trance was. Trance credited his behavior partly from his nature, part from his fear of her escort, and mainly from fear of his grandmother that in her words beat politeness into him.

Now each time Trance went on a date with Corena he knew the escort was there and let them enjoy their meal and the entertainment while he focused on spending time with Corena. Dinner had been spectacular, a scrumptious fillet percanave, which is a large freshwater lake fish that reminded him of perch or walleye. Along with the delicious fish they had a couple savory vegetables and some home style rolls with fresh churned butter. For dessert they had a delicate fruit tart.

After dinner Trance, Corena, and their escort rode to the Cator Symphony, which was playing at the Opthian Reault Theatre. Corena pulled out their tickets and handed them out to the escort. When she handed Trance his ticket he looked at it and was only slightly surprised that they were going to sit in the royal box. Usually Corena tried to sit with him in an ordinary section of a theatre. His curiosity peaked and with a look he asked the question.

“This is a special occasion,” she said to his question, “I know we usually try to sit like ordinary people, but tonight I wanted to just focus on you.”

Trance felt his face flush. “Okay. I have never been to a symphony before and to see and hear from the royal box.” His heart beat faster and before he could say another word he felt Corena’s lips on his.

They presented their tickets and Trance smiled internally at the reaction on the face of the ticket booth attendant. Corena smiled at him and took his arm and they followed half of their escort down the burgundy-carpeted hall. The other half of the escort presented their tickets and followed a few paces back trying to take in the well-dressed crowd. Moments later the couple took their seats with the escort in seats around them, two in the box with them and others two in the next box.

“Princess Corena,” a theatre attendant said politely as he walked up. “May I get you something to drink?”

Corena took a moment to consider and she glanced at Trance before responding. “This is a special occasion so I think we want a bottle of Gammay Blonco.”

“Excellent choice, I will be right back. Also,” he looked at the escort and he tried to find a polite way to ask about them.

Corena immediately understood and said, “Please get them whatever they want. Also please bring us a cheese sampler platter.”

“Absolutely,” he said before turning to signal another attendant and together they took the drink orders from the escort.

As the attendants went off to fulfill the drink orders it suddenly occurred to Trance that Corena had mentioned that this was a special occasion, but she had not mentioned what the special occasion was. “Um, you mentioned that this was a special occasion,” he said, trying not to ask the obvious.

Corena smiled at him and with a mischievous glint in her eye she replied, “You’ll have to figure it out. If you don’t know by the time the concert is over I might tell you.” She then leaned over and gave him a quick kiss and settled back in her seat.

Just a few minutes later they had glasses of wine and Trance toasted their relationship. Corena shifted in her seat in her fabulous black velvet dress. Carefully holding her chalice she laid her head on Trance’s shoulder just as the curtain opened. While the music started Trance felt his mind spin. What to concentrate on? The amazing music, Corena leaning on him, the effects of the wine, or what special occasion was she thinking of, all flashed through his mind.

Two hours later it was intermission and Trance still did not know what the occasion was. He had tried to think of all of the important events in their relationship and could not correlate any to their date tonight. Trance stood in the hall and paced slightly and tried his best to look calm which was more difficult due to his nerves and the second chalice of wine.

Corena took him by surprise by taking his arm from behind. Several people in the hall stopped and stared as the couple strolled back to the royal box. Once back in their seats Corena again leaned against him with a content loving look on her face. Trance felt his heart rate rise and his face flush.

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A shadow moved up on a catwalk above the theatre. Here the shadow had a clear view of the stage and the entire audience including the royal box. The powerful crossbow was loaded and ready to shoot. The shadow considered his shot; his target was there in plain view and not moving. It would be too easy. It waited and watched. So far he had been toying with the target, but now it was a shame that he was finally bound to shoot. This was not fun or exciting. That would be setting the target up in a compromising position or in a public crowded place and getting the shot. This just wasn’t sporting.

Okay, time to be serious. He could make the shot anytime and he waited. No real reason to wait, but how could he make this more interesting. He watched them get up at intermission and thought about shooting then however he hesitated and waited. Now they were back and he put the bow up and carefully sighted. The concert continued and he sat back and waited a little more. The final piece was being played and the concert would be over soon. He made up his mind and again raised the bow and carefully sighted in. Now is the time and the game is over.

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The music approached its crescendo and Trance still did not know what the special occasion was. As the symphony hit the last note and the conductor had the musicians stand to well deserved applause Trance wondered if Corena would tell him what the occasion was. Let it be something easy.

With a twinkle in her eye Corena leaned over and gave Trance a quick kiss before asking, “Well have you figured it out yet?”

Trance felt his face flush and he had to say, “Sorry, I really don't.”

Just then three things happened at once. As the applause continued, Corena pulled Trance into her and passionately kissed him. She pulled back and with a quick move of her hand she handed him a velvet box. Trance looked at in surprise and looked at her curiously. “Well, this is the night I give this to you.”

Trance took the box and opened it up to find what he thought of as a manly necklace of silver chain with a silver cross and silver shield. It seemed there was writing on the shield and he held it up higher so he could read the inscription. “'Be mine till the Breaking! Love Corena mr.'” He looked at her with love and curiosity. “Till what breaking, and what does mr mean?”

Corena smiled mischievously and replied, “Till the Breaking of the Sky silly. Don't you remember the phrase from church? It refers to when the only beloved returns in glory. And the 'mr' is a million roses.” and as she kissed him again he felt a tickle in his neck and it seemed something buzzed past him.

Trance was in the process of putting the necklace on when the woman in the row behind them suddenly exclaimed, “Owe!” He turned to see what the matter was and froze. There stuck through his seat was a deadly crossbow bolt with a razor edged broadhead. The lady stepped back and suddenly screamed as blood blossomed on her right thigh and there was a torn cut in her dress. Instantly the nearest of Corena’s escort leaped over a couple seats and arrived and took in the bolt.

With professional precision his hand whipped down and he took out his comp pad and in a moment used it to take pictures of the bolt and the ladies wound and then with another tap on the device he called his second. “Routh, I need you to call the sheriff’s office and get them here immediately. Someone shot a heavy crossbow bolt at,” he paused and looked at which seat the bolt had penetrated. Strange, it is in Trance’s seat. Who would want to kill him? “Tell them someone shot at the Princess’s date. Also shut this place down. Get the others to start checking everyone out. Nobody leaves till they get cleared. Keep it up till the sheriffs get here.”

“Yes Sir,” Routh’s voice replied.

Trance looked around and tried to see where the bolt must have come from. While he looked for the archer, Corena did her best to take a look at the lady's leg and assisted in treating it and surprising her. “My lady, you shouldn’t be doing that. I can take care of it.”

“Nonsense, you are injured in my presence so it is my duty to take care of you. When the medical team arrives they can do a better job at fixing that,” Corena said as she made a makeshift bandage and wrapped the lady's leg. “Captain, did you call for a medical wagon? This lady had a cut on her leg from that and she needs to get to a clinic or hospital to get stitches.”

“Yes your Highness,” and he tapped his pad again and called the nearest medical clinic and summoned the medical wagon. “They will be here in a couple minutes.”

“Excellent, also let them know that this lady's medical costs will be covered by the palace,” Corena said and straightened and smiled at the lady.

Stunned, the lady spun her head and looked from the princess to her husband who was looking on just as surprised. “Thank you my Lady, how can we repay you? It isn’t necessary for you to pay for this. It isn’t a bad wound.”

“It is Corena, and it is my pleasure to take care of you,” and then with a twinkle in her eye she reached back into her purse and pulled out a few currents, the domino shaped bars of Althorian currency. Corena counted out some money and handed it to the lady who was looking even more surprised. “What you can do for me is to take this and after you and your handsome husband leave the medical center go to dinner on me. This should cover for wherever you decide to go.” The medical team was just then showing up and Corena took Trance’s arm and they stepped aside as the medics approached and started assisting the lady.

Trance couldn’t help looking again for where the shooter had been just as several sheriffs arrived. Two of them approached them and Corena nodded to the one who seemed to be in charge and pointed to Trance’s seat. The man nodded back and then stepped closer to the seat and stopped. He turned and looked back at Corena and Trance. “Whose seat was this?”

“Mine,” Trance replied.

“You are extremely lucky sir. Had this hit you, you would have died pinned to this seat,” the sheriff said. He got down and with an expert eye he looked at the angle of the bolt and swung his head up towards the rafters and cat walks. In a moment he summoned one of the other sheriffs, “Go check out those cat walks. I think the shooter was on one of them.”

“Yes sir,” the other sheriff responded and sped off to locate how to access the catwalks.

The lead sheriff then turned to Corena and said, “I think we can handle this Princess. You and your date and escort may leave. We’ll get statements and investigate, make no mistake, if the shooter is still here, we’ll catch him.”

Trance nodded and could not help thinking that the shooter was gone already. He probably left immediately after shooting. But why did he wait and shoot when he did. If he had taken the shot even a few seconds sooner I’d be dead. Wow! Well the Lord still has a purpose for me. Trance gazed at Corena, and for an instant he was taken with her stunning brown eyes, and silently he thanked God that he was still alive. With Corena on his arm and the escort surrounding them, he turned and walked toward the entrance and back to Corena’s carriage. A date he would remember forever.

Unknown to Trance, Caroul Delore, the author of the “Dr. Renain'' books, was sitting four rows away and had whipped out her comp pad and taken several quick notes. “This would make a great ‘Dr. Renain mystery.’ A shooting in the royal box, wait till we get home. I can see it now, Dr. Renain at the symphony and a murder in the royal box. I feel another best seller and wait till they make the episode.” The bubbly auburn haired older woman said to her husband. They sat back down and while they waited for the sheriff’s to interview them she continued to write notes. Chapter 19

On the Grindstone

The light of dawn was just filtering in the large room and birds in a tree had been singing for a full fifteen minutes. Not one of the sleeping young men noticed. Heavy breathing and snores filled the room. This barracks located in Gaffordsville at the Golden Griffin Camp most commonly known as the Grindstone was slightly larger than the barracks at the Forge. Only fifty prospective Golden Griffins were here in this barracks and were enjoying their first and probably only good night’s sleep for a while before training was to begin.

The room was laid out with twenty-five beds on one side of the long room and the other twenty-five on the other. Sleeping in the fourth bed from the main door to the barracks was Trance. As another snore ripped from his throat he rolled to his right side. This was an unusual night for him. He usually didn’t struggle to sleep and had disturbing dreams; however, this night his sleep was troubled. Not sure why, but he seemed to feel more alone when his family left him the day before. Strange, when they had left him at the Forge he hadn’t felt this way and they were further away from him. Even the thought that most of his close friends were in this barracks with him and Corena was in the next barracks over. Somewhere in his mind he hoped that Corena was sleeping better than him.

The door to the room opened and a well built man in his upper middle years. Captain Shulthur eyed the sleeping young men and then looked down at his chron. Give them a few more seconds and then rouse them up and get them going. He reached up and ran his hand through his light brown hair that had the very beginning of touches of gray. This should be an exciting year with this group of young prospects. He had heard a lot about some of them and had actually been at the end of year tournaments and seen how well most of them had performed. Most curious was the boy from Earth. How good was he and what was his personality really like? It was time to find out.

“All up, both feet on the floor gentlemen! Let’s get going, out of bed you all had a good night's rest now it's time to get sharp. Lets go, I don’t have time to wait, you have lots to do today. Now men!” Shulthur commanded and started walking through the room as the young men came awake with a start and climbed out of bed and stood most of them doing their best to wipe sleep from their eyes.

Trance got out of his bed and stood to his feet. Indeed sleep was in his eyes, but he felt excitement. This is what he had been working toward and now he was here at the Grindstone. It had been nearly unbelievable when he had been the first young man selected to train as a Golden Griffin and by this captain. What would his training be like? Probably like at the Forge and more in depth and intense.

Shulthur walked down the aisle formed by the young men each one at the foot of his bed. Excellent, their training from the Forge was kicking in as he walked and saw how straight they were trying to make themselves. “That was sloppy, but that is okay. We’ll work on this starting tomorrow and you’ll get lots of practice waking in the morning. You are now part of Diamond squad and we are the best, no dispute. This squad will wake at this exact time every morning for the next eight months and you will have an hour with me on the training field doing whatever exercise I give you. Then you will eat breakfast in the camp cafeteria. When you have eaten you will then go to your first weapons class followed by a tactical class, another weapons class will follow and then a historical class and yes another weapons class. Your days will follow this pattern, is that clear!”

“Yes Sir,” the prospects all responded.

“Your new life starts now. Get in your athletic pants and shirts and follow me,” Shulthur commanded and headed toward the door to wait as the young men scrambled to get into the clothes and back to the foot of their beds. “Let’s go, up down, here we go,” and he lead the way out and toward the training field where he got them to a slow run around the field. Afterward he directed them through a series of stamina and cardio exercises along with some strength training. An hour later he brought them to stop and escorted them to the cafeteria.

Trance turned to a heaving Hamon. “Oh my goodness, so this is how our days are going to start.”

Hamon turned and took a deep breath and coughed before saying, “I guess so. I’m beat and I hope breakfast is worth it.”

“I agree, I’m going to need some energy to continue,” Gracer added.

Mandor stumbled up, “I think we’re going to be pushed hard today. I don’t know if I can make it.”

“Yes you can,” Trance said, “We all have to and we have to stick together. Hopefully we can get some rest in the classroom.”

The squad was not disappointed for breakfast. All of his favorite breakfast items were available and Trance had a spectacular first meal. I wonder if this is what we’ll have every day. As he talked to his friends and ate, he couldn’t help looking around and taking in the cafeteria. The room was almost square and instead of long tables there were dozens of tables that could seat ten at a table. The room was nearly full and about a third was taken up by ladies. As soon as his brain comprehended this he swung his eyes around the room. Where was she, was she even here, and then he saw her.

Sitting at one of the head tables and surrounded by her captain and the base commander with what appeared to be three high ranking men and four equally high ranking ladies was Corena. Trance took another bite of his breakfast and as he heard Gracer say, “I think that we’re in for an interesting training day. I caught sight of a schedule on my way here posted on the wall and our squad will have archery training this morning, the ax this afternoon, and the sword later today. This is a great weapons training day.”

Trance nodded his head and looked back to the head table and this time Corena was looking back at him with a grin on her lovely face. She looked back and paid attention to a comment from the commander and an instant later her bright brown eyes met his. She turned back as she was drawn back into the conversation and Trance smiled and turned to the conversation at his own table.

“At least we don’t have to put up with Rex at all today. His squad is in the fourth rotation and I hope he has a great time,” Mandor said, “And actually he ought to thank us.”

“Why would you say that,” Hamon asked.

“He won’t have us to compete with, oh, train with us, and the quality of guy’s in his squad and the squads he will train with are not even close to us or him,” Mandor replied.

Trance joined in the laughter and they finished eating. Sooner than he thought Captain Shulthur came by and gathered the squad together. Swiftly he led the way to the archery range. “Squad, form up,” Shulthur commanded and Trance and his squad lined up. “Gentlemen, this is Master Archer Dellown. Pay attention and follow his instructions and I’ll see you in two hours.” He saluted them and left as Dellown stepped forward with his bow and in short order had run through a quick demonstration of his skills.

“Now I don’t expect you to be able to shoot like that, at least not yet. You will find your bows and target arrows there in the archery armory,” Dellown directed. “You will have this class every other day and will come to the armory and check out your bow and quiver of target arrows. First off we’ll simply shoot at the stationary targets and then move on to the knight targets and moving targets. To pass this class you’ll need to score eighty points on each. Now get your bows and let’s see what you can do.”

In minutes the squad had their bows, some with their personal bows, and the others with bows from the base. Trance was soon at the shooting line and drew back his first arrow. After ten shots he had seventy-seven points, a personal best but not at the level Dellown wanted. Everyone shot as Dellown walked up to them and corrected their grips on the bows and how they held and released their arrows. By the time the class was over Trance had improved slightly.

Shulthur came back into view and had a quick exchange with Dellown before gathering his squad and leading them to their first tactical class. In a familiar pattern the instructor went over the course and then went into the first tactical situations. Two hours later Trance had impressed the instructor and Shulthur came in and led the squad out again. The day progressed to lunch and then continued to the last weapons class of the day. This was the class Trance had been waiting for, swordplay.

“This is Sword Master Errowl,” Shulthur said as he introduced the tall lean man with the almost too handsome face and neat trimmed mustache and beard. “I want you to follow his instructions. Those of you that have selected the sword as your primary weapon will want to pay particular attention he is one of the best swordsman in the Golden Griffins.” Shulthur saluted the squad and on their return salute he turned and left them.

“Good afternoon gentlemen. For starters, how many of you are true swordsmen,” Errowl asked. He looked the squad over and his eyes settled on Trance. “I see several faces that I expected, some that are new, and I am curious about.”

Trance felt his face slightly flush and knew by instinct that the whole squad was looking in his direction. Okay, just remain calm and find out what he has in mind.

“Interesting, I have heard a lot about you and how good you are. Now squad I want to see your stance, everyone select a training sword, preferably one that matches your own sword,” Errowl commanded and watched as everyone went to the vast array of training swords and made their selections.

Trance was slightly surprised by all of the swords. One of his favorite movies had a scene like this and he drew four swords before selecting one that was similar to his Viking inspired sword. He inspected the sword and was struck by the dull edge yet it still had a point. He went back and found a place on the training field and took his assertive stance.

Errowl took his own sword out and casually swung it around as he watched the squad make their selections and then take up their stances. His mind tossed then turned with what he had to do. There was the instructor part and he went up to one young man and in a stern yet assertive voice corrected how the young man was holding his sword and his defensive stance. Another voice was curious about the boy from Earth. Was he as good as it had been reported? Then there was the fact that an old friend wanted this boy knocked down a few notches. Then there was the secret fact that he had not revealed to anyone. He moved to the next young man and in a similar fashion instructed him.

“You need to hold the hilt slightly tighter,” Errowl was addressing Gracer. “Also you need to watch your feet, they are too close together. Get them apart a little more, that way your weight is more evenly divided and it will make it easier for you to move. Now you,” he said as he took a step toward Zam, “Your blade is a bit low, raise it up a couple degrees. That’s it, this way you’ll be able to defend that head of yours. You don’t want to lose it in your first dual. And you,” he had made his way to Mandor, “Your aggressive stance is way too aggressive. What if I came at you like this,” and he demonstrated and came at him with his sword and in a moment had Mandor on the ground. “You see you had no defense for my attack and you’re dead.”

Trance felt a small bead of sweat on his brow and he ignored it. Errowl was now turning his attention to him. How is my grip, is the blade in the proper position, what about my stance. I think everything is right and I feel evenly balanced. There might be something I can improve on. He took a breath and waited; in a moment Errowl was looking him in the eye.

“Ah, I had heard that you preferred the rather rare assertive position. Now this should be fun. I see your grip is correct and looks solid,” Errowl said as he swung at Trance and there was a loud clang of metal as Trance easily blocked the blow. “Good, and your form is impressive and your blade is exactly where you want it,” he swung again with both hands unexpectedly and Trance took both hands and met the blow and felt the man’s strength. “Nice, now how about this,” and he came to Trance with a furious flurry of blows and attacks that would take down an experienced knight.

Trance took the blows and even made a small attack, and in his mind he had visions of his first instruction for the sword at the Forge. Was this how it would go his first couple days and weeks here? The only difference seemed that Errowl was wielding a real sword and was coming at him. Any mistake could be dangerous or fatal.

Errowl smiled inwardly. He was good, but he knew what he was supposed to do. What to do? He made his decision and took a step back and looked at the heaving young man and raised his sword. “This has been fun. Shall we continue,” and he went at Trance with renewed fury and he was taken more and more by surprise as his assault was swept aside. Nobody, not even Rex, was able to withstand his assault for this long. He had to take a step back and catch his own breath. No defense was perfect, there was always a vulnerability that he could exploit; however, Trance seemed to nearly anticipate him and he responded with swift reflexes that seemed nearly natural. He attacked again and he was again swept aside and actually driven back. He is gaining in confidence as we continue. Very well I have to do this. He raised his sword and in four strokes moved in and with an illegal leg sweep and a blow at the young man’s hands and he sent Trance’s sword flying out of his hands and Trance on the ground panting and looking up at Errowl’s sword aimed at his heart.

“That was seriously fun,” Errowl said as he panted also. “You have excellent form and certainly held your own. Rex lasted half that time.” He studied his opponent and struggled with what to say next. “Any Boulthorian knight will have a very rough time against you and he’ll need to have arrangements for his funeral. All of you, did you pay attention to how he defended and attacked. In this course I want all of you to be able to do that.” He needed to focus back on his instruction. “Everyone find a partner and face him and take your stance. When I say, ‘Swing,’ you will take a swing at your opponent. It does not matter who takes an aggressive swing and who swings to defend. Now, ‘Swing.’” Immediately the sound of swords clashing was instantly heard.

Errowl walked around and continued to instruct and correct stances and grips. Again and again he had them just take one swing at each other and their swords clashed. Some had to be corrected several times before he was finally satisfied with their stance and grip. Others, including Trance, Mandor, Zam, Gracer, and Hamon were only given small corrections. Finally the two hours of the class were over and Errowl took the class to the armory where they left their training swords with their other training weapons. From here he dismissed them to Captain Shulthur, except he asked to speak to Trance alone. Shulthur took command of the squad and led them to the mess for their first supper.

Trance stood and waited. What could Errowl want? The Sword Master had seemed to try hard to find something wrong with his stance, position of blade, and his grip. Time and again he felt he was being carefully watched and he took every swing during class, now he wanted a private word. Various images flashed through his mind from being punished for a perceived wrong, to the fact that Errowl did not like him for some reason, to being told that Rex must still be the best swordsman on base. Here he comes, okay what does he have to say?

Errowl stepped up and quickly looked around that they were alone and he looked Trance in the eye and spoke deliberately, “I have been waiting for this moment for some time. This does not leave this place. I went to the end of year tournaments and watched.”

“All right, but why did you want to talk to me here with nobody seeing or hearing,” Trance asked.

Errowl took a moment to look around again before answering, “To be honest no one knows that I went to the tournaments. You also must know that up to the tournaments I had been a friend of General Absolethane.” At the look on Trance’s face Errowl continued, “That’s right, Gerrant and I had been friends for several years. Since I got this position here and away from active duty in a division I have been eagerly looking forward to training Rex. Now, well, I saw what happened.”

Trance tried his best to keep his face calm as he listened; however, he knew that once Errowl said that he had been a friend with Rex and his dad he knew his face had changed. What was coming next he wondered.

“I saw how Rex acted and I was disgusted. This is really difficult; I am in a position that I hate. Gerrant of course thinks that I am still his friend and I have to continue this charade and properly train his son. And yes, he is an excellent swordsman, yet his arrogance even grates on me. At the same time you are different and maybe more gifted with the sword,” Errowl said and waited to see how Trance would respond.

“Okay, are you saying that you have to look like you prefer Rex over me and train him better than me,” Trance said.

“That is sort of the idea. Gerrant does want and expect that. What he does not know is that I have orders from higher up from him and from someone I am completely loyal to. No, don’t ask, just listen. You may find some of your instructors acting this way toward you and being hard on you, most will likely come to respect you like me, while there may be a couple that will go out of their way to try to make you fail. Don’t let them.”

Trance took a moment to process this before replying, “Thanks for being honest with me and telling me. I have noticed a few instructors filling both rolls you mentioned. What should I do?”

“My advice is simple and you should know it already. Be yourself and focus on your lessons. I know that Dellown will probably be tough on you. Just know from me that he is not against you and has the same orders I have, we want you to succeed. Should you need to talk or take more archery practice, you can either go to Shulthur, Dellown, or me. We are here, like we are for any recruits. Never fear asking. Now I think you should go and get something to eat, you’re going to need to keep up your strength and health. Oh and keep up with your endurance training,” at this Errowl nodded and turned quickly and strode away.

Trance watched him go. He knew that this was going to be tougher training, but from what Errowl just said, things might be tougher on him than normal. Lord, give me the strength and endurance was his prayer as he went to get his supper. His friends quietly asked him about his conversation with Errowl. He wouldn’t lie, but he could not tell them everything, so he replied that Errowl was giving him some advice on his swordsmanship and to expect to be pushed during training. This satisfied them for the moment. However, as supper continued he would catch one of his friends watching him and their looks said more than words. His honing was just beginning.

Chapter 20

Arrows and Armor

Trance and his friends had been training hard for the last two months. In two more months everyone would finally get to train with their own weapon and work to perfect their skills and face the Tower to finally be named Golden Griffins. This day started like every day so far until Captain Shulthur called the squad together.

“Squad, I have to tell you that you are now ready for a new class and unfortunately it is this morning after breakfast. So due to this you’ll have a snack later this morning, now follow me,” with that Shulthur led the way. Moments later he opened the door to a classroom with desks for all of them and a large view screen at the front of the room.

Sitting at a desk at the front of the room was the oldest instructor Trance had seen yet. The man stood as Trance stepped behind a desk in the front row with Hamon on his right and Zam on his left. Gracer sat to the right of Hamon and Mandor was on the left of Zam as Shulthur walked up to the instructor to make the introduction. At that moment Trance looked down and quickly scanned the room with a curious question buzzing his brain. Why are there buckets at all of the desks?

“Attention everyone,” Shulthur commanded, “This is your instructor Major Oulan. I want you to pay attention to him and I’ll see you in two hours.” He saluted Oulan and turned and left the room shutting the door behind him.

Oulan stood a moment after the class had entered the room and returned Shulthur’s salute and then turned his attention to the class. He took a moment to scan the room and look the recruits in the eye and paused when he came to Trance. How many of you will need your bucket? He wondered and took a breath and spoke, “You can take your seats.” He waited as chairs were pulled out and the class sat down.

As Trance took his seat and pulled out his comp pad to take notes he noticed that Oulan had three mechanical fingers, both pinkies and the ring finger on his left hand. On that artificial finger was an unusually bright ring.

Oulan paced a little before continuing, “This is one of your most crucial classes to become Golden Griffins.” He watched the faces of the young men as he always did teaching this class. “I have taught this class for sixty-seven years and each time I get the same reaction to that statement, and I find it true every year and with every class. This is not a weapons class and this is not a strategy class, this is a class about your heart and soul and gut,” he said as he leaned forward on his desk for emphasis. He stood erect again and continued, “What you are going to study in this class is what can happen to you on the battlefield in a mere skirmish or an all out battle. With the Boulthorians increasing their raids this class is needed more. In fact what I am going to teach you is why the planets in the galaxy have the very weapons we use. It is for this reason to prevent fighting and wars that we have these weapons and outlawed the pursuit of powered weaponry.”

Trance recalled hearing something like this before and could not place where he had heard it. He took a couple notes and looked eagerly to hear more.

“The original treaty has long been disregarded and lost to the centuries, but the focus has remained the same. People might not fight as much if they have to look their enemy in the eye to slay them,” Oulan paused a second and continued. “I am not going to teach you how to be cold killers, that is not why I am here. This class is to show you the effects of battles, war, and what could happen to you and your friends. Yes, and through this class you will see what exactly your weapons can do to your enemies and theirs to you. Some of you may already have experience with that,” at this he noticed Trance react. I wonder how you would know.

In fact Trance could not help but remember defending the Markem farm and the day he assisted in protecting Corena the day she gave him his horse. He knew what he had done to those Boulthorian knights and still occasionally he would have a nightmare about the carnage, but then he would do his best to try to let the images go and try and focus on the moment, where he was and that he was alive to laugh and love. God help me through this class.

Oulan picked up a small remote and continued, “I want to teach you how to be clinical and focused when you are on your missions. As I said, I am not going to teach you how to be cold killers, likewise I don’t want you to shut down your feelings when you are out there and maybe find yourself on some battlefield in combat. I will teach you to be calm and focus on those feelings to get you through the horrors of battle around you. How effective will you be if at the sight of a slain friend or comrade and you fall to pieces or you lose your last meal,” he said and for dramatic effect he turned on the screen and immediately pictures of fallen knights appeared. Many of them with gaping and open wounds or some pierced with arrows and one man with a spear through him. “These are not faked pictures, they are real pictures taken after some of the most famous battles you have learned about.”

Immediately Trance knew why the buckets were there as more pictures appeared on screen the sickening sound of retching came from a fourth of the class. Trance felt bile build up and he knew he had to focus on something or he would soon join them. As he watched he noticed that most of the pictures had a description of where the picture was taken and a date and in most cases the type of wound being displayed. More retching as a gruesome ax wound in a knight’s chest from a battle just fifteen years ago.

“I want you to notice that in some of these pictures that the wounds pictured were not immediately fatal,” a few pictures appeared of dagger and sword wounds that could not have been fatal. “And there are some wounds that are instantly fatal,” and just as immediately there was a picture of a headless corpse and instantly more retching and the stink of sick flooded the room.

Trance gagged and the urge for him to use his bucket was getting almost overwhelming. More fatal wounds were shown. Then he heard Oulan say, “As most of you know from your training so far and from your school years, the enemy won’t just come at you face to face. Beware of your opponents coming up from behind,” and the image that would haunt Trance for years appeared on screen. It was an Althorian knight impaled from behind by a lance. He could not resist any more and just got to his bucket in time.

Oulan continued as he noticed that there were only two young men that still had not used their buckets yet. “You won’t just see clean cuts, severed limbs, and wounds immediately fatal and serious that could cripple, maim, and lead to death. There is also the blood,” and lakes of crimson were shown, “and there is nothing pleasant about this,” with the next image the last remaining bucket was used and most of the buckets were used again. The scent of sick was now so strong that Oulan stepped back and opened an ointment bottle and applied a dab of it under his nose and he went on. “I don’t want to just focus on our dead. You’ll have to face injured, maimed and dying enemy knights. Mainly the ones antagonizing us the most are the Boulthorians.”

Now images of injured and slain Boulthorian knights appeared. Thankfully the retching was slowing down but some still heaved on empty. Trance was desperately trying to slow his heaving when he spotted something that brought him upright. It was the image on screen of a Boulthorian knight with an arrow in his heart. That should not be there, he thought. The breastplate would have deflected the shot. He watched more images and heard Oulan describe the battles and their results when he saw another image of a Boulthorian knight with an arrow in his heart. This could not be a coincidence. Four more images and then a Boulthorian with a spear in his heart then eight pictures later of a Boulthorian knight with an axe impaled in the same spot. Almost more curious was the sheen of the axe blade. Trance knew the sheen, it was the same sheen on most of the arrowheads he had seen as well as most spearheads and they had the same sheen and brightness of Oulan’s ring.

The class finally ended and Oulan was dismissing the class, “Most of you will want to take advantage of this. You have an extra hour before your next class; I believe that you are heading to the archery range. So you know the cafeteria is open to you to get something in your systems again. I will see you again in two days and we will begin to work on preventing this mess. You are dismissed.” He dabbed more ointment and sat heavily at his desk only to look up in surprise.

“Sir, that was an interesting lesson,” Trance started trying to calm his empty stomach and find the proper words to ask the questions he had burning in his mind. He didn’t want to give anything away to anyone but he had to satisfy his curiosity. “May I ask you a couple questions?”

Oulan sat back and gave an encouraging smile. “You may ask and I just may give you an answer. Be quick with them, you don’t want to be late to your archery.”

Trance asked, “Uh, sir, what is the ointment you put under your nose?”

Oulan gave a rough laugh and picked up the little bottle. “This is a special ointment that helps lessen the smell of vomit. It doesn’t keep it all out, it helps just enough that I can teach and then run to the bathroom. Sometimes I even get hit, look,” and he pointed to a bucket at his own desk that Trance had not seen till now. “What is your second question?”

Trance stood straighter and asked, “What is your ring made of?”

Oulan sat forward and could not hide his surprise. “This he said,” indicating the ring on its artificial finger, “is a pure quarvalian wedding band. Why would you want to know that?”

Trance was feeling more nauseous and tried to keep his focus. “I simply noticed that many of the weapons shown in the pictures you showed us had a similar sheen or brightness to your ring.”

“Well that is easy enough. Quarvalian is an important metal to good quality weapons. It gives the weapon a diamond hard and sharp blade. Most battle arrowheads and spearheads are made of quarvalian. It is very plentiful on Althora and in this area of the galaxy. Even a sheriff with a quarvalian and steel blade will have a super sharp blade that will stay sharp with regular honing and occasionally run it on a sharpening stone,” Oulan said.

“Would it be best to have a pure quarvalian sword,” Trance asked, remembering the particularly bright blade of Rex’s sword.

“I have seen a couple examples of pure quarvalian swords in service; however, I would not recommend it. Usually quarvalian swords are made for decorations. It is a quirk in the metal that while it is exceptional as armor piercing arrowheads and spearheads, that when it is forged in a large blade such as a sword that if it is not forged at the correct temperature it will acquire a brittle spot and eventually when it strikes good armor or a better sword it will shatter. You may not think so but I have seen it happen on four occasions,” Oulan explained.

Trance was struck and a small smile spread in his mind, better not let it show. Dang, I think he saw that. “What metal would make a better sword? What about titanium?” Trance asked curiously.

“Titanium, now I have seen a few swords made with that. But I don’t know how much was available to you on your planet, but here it is a rare metal and it’s rather difficult to work with,” Oulan answered.

“What about telvian, isn’t that a good metal,” Trance asked.

“Like quarvalian, I have seen a couple knights with telvian swords. Now telvian is slightly lighter and stronger than steel and it is rust and corrosion proof, however it will not hold its edge like quarvalian. That is why some of the best blades are forged from a mix of quarvalian and telvian. Sometimes they are forged with another metal and then you have an even better quality sword or whatever weapon,” Oulan said.

“What would make the best sword then?”

“If you wanted the very best quality sword, or any weapon for that matter, you’d want a blade made from quarvalian, telvian, and yorian. Now yorian is a rare metal, but for some reason these three metals mesh together and are easier to work with and are almost like titanium. Only the very elite knights have weapons made from them. The blade will look like this,” and Oulan pulled out his dagger.

Trance felt his mind stop. He had seen only two blades with that particular sheen and brightness. Corena’s sword, and he could not breathe, his own sword. Wow! Trance tried his best to hide his thoughts and keep his face straight; however, he had the strong impression that Oulan knew.

“You’ll learn more I think once you get to your archery class,” Oulan said with a wink. “I suggest that you run, get something to eat, I recommend something bland, then head to your archery lesson. I’ll see you in a couple days for our next lesson, just don’t eat a lot first,” and with that Oulan dismissed him.

Trance did as Oulan suggested and at the cafeteria he ate a very modest snack. Then he joined his squad as they headed for the archery range. As he arrived he noticed a row of various sets of armor. Some he was familiar with while some others were new to him. One was very curious; it looked both ancient and sophisticated at the same time.

“Good morning gentlemen,” said Dellown with a knowing look. “I hope you're having a good morning.”

Trance joined his friends in groaning at the man’s attempted humor. He knows what kind of morning we’ve had. As he thought this, another thought crossed his mind. Maybe he would learn about the metals used in manufacturing armor and most of all the weakness he spotted in the Boulthorian armor.

“I suppose you are curious about why I have these examples of armor out here,” Dellown started, “This will be a most exciting class and yes you will get to use your bows. Today we are going to examine these suits of armor and learn their strengths and weaknesses. Let us start over with this suit of Althorian armor and go over what most of you know.” Dellown proceeded to describe the parts of the armor and its strengths and weaknesses and places where archers would target. Then he moved onto Kainanth armor. One set after another was examined including the ancient suit of armor. “This suit is quite unique. There are no records of where this armor came from. As you can tell this armor is similar to Griffin armor in that the scales resemble feathers. Note however that the feathers do not look like eagle or hawk feathers. This armor is also the oldest and finest example of tri-forged armor from quarvalian, telvian, and yorian. Even this armor has its weakness, here at the shoulder, at the hamstring, and the throat.”

Trance was fascinated. When he stepped up to examine the armor he had a thought about the scales. There was a feather he had seen once that looked like this. He tried to remember where he’d seen the feather and what bird it had come from. It was definitely from a predatory bird, but which one. Something that struck him was the shape of the helmet. It was broader than the Griffin helmet and something tickled in his mind. If he looked at it a certain way it almost looked like an owl. That was funny, he did not know of any species that was like an owl. Well, not exactly. There was one very ancient and extinct race that he had heard about and they were mentioned only in myth and legend. What were they called; however, before he could remember what they had been called Dellown had moved to the Boulthorian armor.

“This is an excellent example of Boulthorian armor. As you can see it is mostly plate armor and few joints where you can see the little mail they use. You can see that their armor is made from bi-forged telvian and corthian,” Dellown instructed. “This armor also has it weak spots. These joints are vulnerable here, here, and here,” he pointed to the shoulder under the breastplate, and a very slight gap between the breast and back plates. “You can also target the throat,” he continued. After the last armor was gone over he then moved to the point of their lesson.

“Since all of you are on the verge of scoring the needed eighty-five points on the target to qualify as either an archer or as a second or in some cases a third weapon I think it is time for you to start to practice on the second part of your archery. This is what will truly make you,” Dellown said dramatically. “To finish qualifying you will need to shoot and hit a Boulthorian knight target in a vital spot, not just once, but one at twenty yards, one at thirty yards, and a third at forty yards. There will be one additional knight target at fifty yards for a bonus that will certainly qualify you,” then with a smirk he added, “There is something you should know. You’ll need to hit these three or four targets in only ten arrows. Now I don’t expect you to do this today. Today you will practice shooting at the targets and have to hit them in twenty arrows. Anyone that fails to hit all three of these targets in twenty arrows will have to run a lap of the field and then try again. Now let’s get ready and line up two at a time.”

Trance looked at his friends and felt his stomach flip. He was now getting so close to consistently scoring the eighty-five points and now this. How was he to hit the target dummy dressed in Boulthorian armor in a vital area? Please Lord; guide my hands and my arrows. He took up his bow and slung his quiver of target arrows and found a place in line four back.

Hamon stepped up next to him and spoke softly, “I guess I will run with you. Don’t look so worried, probably most of us will be running today.”

Trance felt slightly better. Hamon was just slightly better than him with a bow. He waited and watched as the first two archers took their positions and proceeded to shoot. Trance shook his head as he watched two of his archer friends either miss or have arrows bounce off the armor. Finally after eight arrows one of the young men hit the twenty-yard target in the throat. The other young man hit his twenty-yard target under the arm after three more arrows. The first young man got lucky and with his thirteenth arrow hit the thirty-yard target under the arm, but he failed to land a solid hit on the forty-yard target and had to run his lap. The other young man followed. He hit his thirty-yard target under the arm as well, but only had one arrow left to shoot at the forty-yard target.

The second pair didn’t fare better. They also had to run a lap and get back in line. Up now were Gracer and Zam. Trance rooted for both of his friends as they took aim and fired their first arrows. Arrow after arrow left their bows. Zam was letting his frustration show as it took him ten arrows just to get a solid hit on the twenty-yard target. Gracer however was a better archer and hit the twenty-yard target in five arrows and on his eleventh arrow hit the thirty-yard target in the neck. Zam’s last arrow just missed the forty yard target under the arm and he had to run his lap while Gracer was the first to pass by nailing his forty yard target in the neck on arrow eighteen. Dellown signaled him and had him take his final two arrows and try for the fifty-yard target. Both arrows bounced off the armor, but at least he didn’t have to run, this time.

“You can do this,” Hamon told his friend. “I believe in you. Didn’t you tell me about that time you fought some Boulthorian knights at your friend’s farm. Think of that and remember what Corena has shown you.” With that Hamon drew his first arrow and let it fly. Not surprising his arrow clanged and bounced off the armor by the arm.

Trance gave a nervous smile to his friend and took his first arrow and lined up and fired. Clang the arrow banged and bounced off the armor. Again and again both Hamon and Trance fired with no effect until Hamon's seventh arrow found a vulnerable spot. Trance’s seventh arrow came close to finding the arm, but again rang off the armor. Hamon rushed his next arrow and cursed as it missed his target. Trance almost yelled in triumph as his arrow found the target's neck.

“This is harder than I thought,” Hamon said as again his arrow rang off the armor.

“You’re right,” Trance replied. Something Hamon said made him think and Trance focused on his next arrow and just missed the thirty-yard target at the arm.

Hamon breathed relief as his thirteenth arrow sank successfully in the target under the left arm. Trance was finally successful with his thirty yard target on his sixteenth arrow. Hamon came down to his last arrow and swore as it just missed the neck. “Good luck,” he told Trance as he started on his run around the field.

Trance looked down and was nearly convinced that he would be joining Hamon. He shook his head and nocked his arrow and raised his bow and drew. Somehow he heard something Corena had said and he adjusted his aim. It was then that he noticed something and decided to see if he was right. Well if he missed he would be running; however, it would be amazing if it worked. He adjusted his stance and turned his aim and focused like Corena had instructed him. Breathe in and release, the arrow left his bow and flew forty yards. Crang, the arrow hit and to everyone’s surprise that arrow sank right into the target's heart.

“How!” was shouted by several voices at once. Dellown was stunned and looked almost approving at Trance and had him take his place back in line. Trance looked and found Hamon smiling and nodding his head in appreciation before turning and jogging and then continuing his run around the field.

Chapter 21

Facing the Tower

For the next four months Trance and his friends exercised, trained, and took classes. Truly the hardest class was Oulan’s. In one class Oulan even showed the pictures and told the story of the battle he was in defending his hometown against a raiding Boulthorian troop. Trance found it fascinating as Oulan went around and showed his three mechanical digits. Both of his pinkies and his ring finger on his left hand had been chopped off during a frantic duel during the fighting. The mechanized digits were cunningly fashioned out of a dark metal framework able to flex like a real finger.

Thankfully Trance hardly had to deal with Rex. Only once in a while he would see Rex and his friends off in the distance training. Trance wondered at times if perhaps whoever made the schedule intentionally made sure that the two had no contact. To him that was okay, it made it easier for Trance and his squad to train in peace. Through reliable sources he learned that somehow Rex still had some semblance of his old school reputation and that Rex and his friends were all prepared to qualify with their weapons and “face the tower.”

Trance had heard that phrase but didn’t think too much about it. At first he just passed it off as maybe something the Golden Griffins said. Then on the day of qualifying Zam looked at him and asked, “Hey Trance, do you think we’re ready to face the tower?”

“What?” Trance asked, not sure what he meant.

“You know. Oh, maybe you don’t. Okay, to become fully fledged Golden Griffins we not only have to qualify with our weapons, we also have to get fully armed and armored and march with all of the squads on base through the city and head to Ezra’s Tower. When we get there we must go in and climb to the top. We have to make it the whole way.”

“That’s right,” Gracer added. “Zak told me that the march is about ten miles to the tower and it is more like a parking garage than a regular tower or spire. It has thirty levels and you have to make it all the way to the top to finish. If you can’t make it you get dropped back to the knights. That would be so humiliating for one of us not to make it.”

“Wow,” Trance said. He had always been told that the Golden Griffins were the most elite knights and they were some of the toughest knights in the military of the kingdom of Cator here on Althora. Then he remembered what Kyle had said, now this was making sense. Then he wondered, “What happens if we don’t qualify with one of our weapons? What happens then?”

Zam answered, “If, and I mean if, one of us does not qualify with one of our chosen weapons we will have one last chance to proceed and that is if we qualify with another weapon that is not one of our chosen weapons. That is why we have to practice with all of the weapons and try to qualify with them all. So for example if you get eighty-four points in archery instead of eighty-five, it doesn’t matter at that point shooting at the knight targets, you fail to qualify in archery. Now for you to still become a Golden Griffin you have to take another weapon, like the mace, and then you still have to make the march and get to the top of the Tower.”

“Yeah,” Gracer said. “Zak just barely qualified with his chosen weapons and said the hardest thing for him to do is make it up that tower.”

At that moment Hamon came over to join the conversation. “I don’t think any of us will have any problems qualifying with our weapons. I am nervous about the march and then climbing the tower. There is something to consider, making this even tougher is that we will start our day and have to go from one qualifying event to another and then line up in full armor and get ready to march, and we are in the first division to take the qualifying course. Of course the ladies will be out there also and I for one don’t want to be outshined by them, well probably Corena will be impressive.”

Mandor said, “I’m ready for the qualifying. Thanks to you guys I think I have a real chance of making it. Trance I think all of us need to thank you. We would not be here if it wasn’t for you. I pray that I get the pleasure of serving in the same division as you, and something tells me that you’ll be in charge of a division sooner than anyone thinks.”

Zam concurred, “I was just going to be happy serving as a knight and when I surprised my folks that I was going to try for the Golden Griffins they were stunned and excited for me. Thanks Trance, I know you have helped me.”

“Zak was right when he told me about you, and Zak had just sent me a letter saying that his division is needing some new men. Wouldn’t it be something if all of us got in his division, that would be amazing,” Gracer added just as Shulthur entered the room.

“Gentlemen, we have five minutes before we go out to the qualifying fields. My expectation is that all of you will do your absolute best out there. Remember that there is no dishonor if you do not make it in qualifying. I want you to know that if you find it in you to succeed and qualify with your selected weapons and make the march up to and climb to the top of the Tower you will join a long and extremely prestigious lineage of Golden Griffins. Now I have paired you all up and you and your partner will run all of the qualifying events and then if you survive and make it we will line up and make the march to the tower. Let me read off the pairs. First up will be Trance and Mandor, next Hamon and Gracer, next Zam and Jalthord,” Shulthur said and continued to list the pairs.

Trance looked at his squad as the pairs were listed. Shulthur must have put a lot of thought in his choices of pairs. I think each pair will bring out the best in each other so most of them should qualify with their chosen weapons as well as probably qualify with alternate weapons. I wonder what we will have first. Trance did a last check of his armor and made sure his weapons were ready to go. Here I am Lord, if it be thy will give me the endurance and skill to qualify today.

Shulthur looked at his chron and then signaled the squad, “It is time, good luck gentlemen. Let’s go,” and he led the squad out of the locker room and toward the training fields and their first qualifying event.

Being that this was the second month of winter and it had snowed for the last four days the field had been cleared of snow. Trance had learned early when he got his armor that the inner layer that was like long underwear was not only moisture wicking and cooling that it also was insulating in cooler weather. When he got to the field he was slightly disappointed that the first qualifying event for him was the ax; however, as he looked around he saw that nearby at the sword area was Corena and her squad. This might not be that bad if we follow her squad. Unfortunately, he would not get to see Corena take the course with her sword. Already Shulthur and one of the course officials were calling him and Mandor to the starting line for their qualifying run. Trance looked and nodded at his friend and knew that they would both attack the course with everything they had. A moment later they were unleashed on the course and Trance focused on what he had to do. At the finish line Trance finished barely ahead of Mandor and both bent over heaving to catch their breath. After a moment or two or three Trance looked up and was ecstatic to see that both of them had qualified with the ax.

Pair after pair took the course and all of them scored well enough to qualify. As the last of his squad went down the course the crowd rippled with excitement. Shulthur sensed that a moment was coming and he quickly glanced at Trance. With a touch of something he rarely felt he motioned to Trance and Mandor. In a way he felt for Mandor, but it could have been any of the squad up with Trance. However, he did know that they were friends and that they practiced with and against each other regularly.

This was his event and suddenly he felt more nervous than he had all the time he had during his training. What if he didn’t qualify, what if he excelled and Mandor beat him. Well he could live with that. One of his other friends could top his score, and then a more troubling thought popped in his head. What if he did excel and even maybe set a course record, Rex was going to qualify later. Could he live with Rex coming and trying to upstage him and even outperforming him setting a new course record? That could happen. So what, if Rex came out here later and out does him, so be it. Taking a moment he prayed, “Lord just settle my mind so I can attempt to qualify. That is all I ask, clear my mind of doubt and relax my body. The score will happen as you set it and I’ll be fine with that. Let it be thy will. Amen.”

Before he stepped up to the starting line Trance stepped up to Mandor. Both boys raised their visors. “Remember you are just as good a swordsman as I am. I know what they are waiting for. Don’t let it get in your head,” something Corena had said stuck in his head and he continued, “Don’t think about me or worry about our scores. I don’t want you to even think about showing me up. If you score higher than me, so be it. Focus on you and your targets. Let’s go get them and qualify.”

Both boys stepped to their lines and lowered their visors and they nodded to each other. They looked forward and the signal was given. Trance took off and approached his first automaton target. He suddenly felt a prickle and was slightly surprised at the way the robot knight came at him. This was not how the automatons for the ax qualifying had come at him. He battled the knight and struck the fatal blow and moved on to the next target. His feeling increased as the second knight came at him. As he struck down this knight he sensed more than saw that the crowd had noticed something wrong also. Now he was furious, so he focused all his energy and drive on the next two targets. So whoever it was, had followed him here and was trying now to finish him.

While he swiftly and deftly dealt with the next three targets there was uproar in the control booth that controlled the automaton targets. Several officials poured into the room as they and the controllers sought to figure out what was going on with the targets facing Trance. Two of them were specifically sent there from King Maximus. None knew what was going on or how those twenty targets or actual robot knights were there.

On the course Trance was definitely getting tired as he swung his sword and took the next target's head off. Mentally he was counting down as each target went down. Seven now to go was the count and he took three swings to come about and defeat his next target. With each one they were coming faster and fiercer than the last. A lucky swing and he just caught the blade from his next target. He blocked four more times and let his instincts take over. Why didn’t even enter his mind yet and he dealt another fatal blow. Five, clash band clash, deadly blow sent the knights head rolling. Here we go, with two strikes the next knight lay on the ground twitching. He pivoted and shifted his weight and drove his sword straight into the next knight bringing it down. The last two nearly came at him in tandem and he fought both. He ducked one blow and almost paused fatally and he was startled by what he saw.

Oh my, he hadn’t paid much attention to his other target's swords, but now he was up close and could not believe what he saw. The edge was gleaming. Clash clash, he blocked two incoming blows and a swift thrust took out the first knight and a moment later Trance smacked the remaining knights sword aside and thrust his sword right through the armor over the heart. He withdrew his sword. In a frustrated and swift move he sheathed his sword and bolted to cross the finish line. Nearly three seconds later Mandor crossed the line and fell down.

Shulthur came up and checked on both boys and several officials and controllers raced past and down the course to check on the strung out target knights. Trance was bent over heaving trying to finally catch his breath. Mandor was also breathing heavily and was curious as to why the target knights were being looked at. Shulthur protectively stood over both boys and kept a watchful eye on the rest of his squad.

“What’s going on,” Mandor asked.

“It seems that somehow the automatons for Trance were switched to full functioning robot knights. Nobody seems to know where they came from or who was running them and from where. By the way even with the robot knights, you set a new course record,” Shulthur said.

Both young men looked at each other and Mandor looked happiest and was ready to congratulate his friend until he noticed how he was looking. Trance had an unusual look on his face. Trance kept trying to catch his breath and finally got out, “Have them check the swords.”

“What?” asked Shulthur surprised.

“The swords,” and Trance pointed to the course he had completed. “They’re sharpened.”

Shulthur looked shocked and immediately strode toward the course and quickly addressed the nearest officer. The official looked shocked and ran to another officer and together they ran onto the course as the targets were being loaded on a wagon to take them off and place new automaton targets for the next recruit.

Even though he was deeply concerned about his course run, Trance was fascinated by how swift the course was cleared and set up for the next recruit. “How many automaton targets do they go through?” He asked out of curiosity.

Gracer came over to answer, “Hundreds I think, maybe a few thousand. They’re made pretty cheap from some factory planet. Oh, and they are totally recyclable. After today all of the targets used will be sifted through and refitted for the next year's batch of recruits. My brother Zak told me that there are some targets that have been refitted and used again, uh, maybe forty or fifty times. There might even be some used for over sixty.”

Just then the officials returned and one was carrying a robot knight’s sword. It was clear that the blade was not only sharpened, it had been honed. The man with the sword went up to Shulthur and took him aside and quietly talked to him. Shulthur nodded and took the sword in his hand and examined it. He turned his head to glance at Trance and looked back and asked more questions. The officials shook their heads and shrugged. He handed the sword back and made another comment and then headed back to the squad.

“Hamon, Gracer, get to the line you’re up,” Shulthur then signaled Trance over to him, “I need a word with you.”

Trance walked over feeling his nerves quake. “Sir,” he said as he walked up respectfully. What else is going to happen to me today? He wondered as he waited for Shulthur to speak.

Shulthur did his best to stand calmly and placed a hand on Trance’s shoulder and did his best casual look at the crowd, “Okay, it seems that whoever tried their best to slay or harm you at the Forge has found a way here. No don’t look at me, look out there and smile, we don’t want anyone in the crowd to know anything dangerous has happened. Let’s just say that we don’t know where the robot knights came from. Don’t ask any questions at this time. For now you will be watched closely for the rest of the day.” With a glance and a wink, “You my friend, I don’t want you to worry. Just show whoever it is how noble you are. All right, go celebrate with your squad.” As Trance walked away Shulthur took a serious look around. This had never happened before, someone trying to murder one of his squad. Why this young man, it didn’t make any sense.

Trance walked back to rejoin his squad and before anyone could ask him anything he motioned that he wanted a moment alone. Why am I being targeted like this? What have I done, or whom did I harm? He didn’t expect an answer, at least right now. He put his hands on his hips and strode a few steps away and closed his eyes. Taking several deep breaths he did his best to clear his mind. Opening his eyes he turned and went back and stood quietly by as pair after pair took the course. All of his friends seemed to easily qualify with the sword, in fact the entire squad qualified.

Now the squad was headed to the next weapon, the military flail or more commonly called a mace and chain. For once the weapon felt odd and ungainly in his hand. He didn’t have time to think before he and Mandor were at the line and off and charging down the course. This time Mandor crossed the line first and qualified. For the first time Trance did not qualify. He missed by five points. That was fine since he didn’t really like the weapon. In an effort to relieve his stress and get back to his positive self he turned and with an oops look he shrugged to his friends.

Up next the war hammer and again Trance did not qualify. Trance took great pleasure this time as he rooted for Hamon. This was Hamon’s time to shine with his primary weapon, his sledge-like hammerhead that his grandfather had forged on its sixteen inch handle. With deadly efficiency Hamon charged down the course and crushed every target in his way. Trance was going to run up and celebrate with his friend, but came up short and politely stood back. Hamon had crossed the line setting a new course record for the war hammer and fell to his knees with tears freely falling down his cheeks. He had dropped his hammer and shield and put his hands to his face and a wail escaped his lips as he bent to the ground.

Trance humbly approached and knelt by his friend and put his hand on Hamon’s shoulder. Not a word was said as more of their friends approached and knelt beside them. All of them knew that Hamon had lost his grandfather just a few years ago. Hamon collected himself and with a nod from him everyone stood to their feet. More of them continued to attempt to qualify with the hammer.

The spear was next and again Trance felt his nerves. With the spear Trance would need to qualify with the regular spear, however, he would need to score well with the pike, lance, and javelin. Trance breathed deeply and thankfully as his last thrown spear scored a nine, which allowed him to qualify with the weapon by three points.

Almost like destiny, there was a brief pause and Trance got one of his wishes and got the supreme pleasure of watching and rooting for Corena to qualify in archery. He had seen her shoot before, but there was a deadly calm as she took the line for the target shoot and drew her first arrow. The lethal projectile sprang from her re-curved bow that always reminded Trance of a Cupid’s bow. He was not surprised that she scored a bulls-eye. Arrow after arrow scored near perfect. Trance felt her slight frustration as her eighth arrow solidly struck nine instead of another bulls-eye worth ten. Her last two arrows gave her a score of ninety-nine clearly qualifying her at the moment. Now she had the knight targets to shoot at. It only took five arrows for her to take down the three knight targets to easily qualify, and then she took out three of the bonus knight targets. With modest pride she lowered her bow and turned to her squad. Just then she looked over and caught Trance’s eye. Her smile widened and as Trance was being summoned to the line to qualify with the mace Corena blew him a kiss and turned to her giggling friends.

Trance felt his heart race for more than one reason. Oh boy, vividly he remembered how Corena had told him that when he was qualifying or in battle not to think about her but at this moment that might be impossible.

“Hey Sir Kissy Kiss, yeah, remember we need to qualify with this,” Mandor teased and raised his mace. “Let’s crush this course and if we have a moment then you can go over there and kiss her. If you don’t get your mind here you might not qualify. Also it won’t look good on you if I beat you again. I know you can do this.”

Trance was at first taken aback, but at his friend's smile Trance turned and readied to take the course. The signal was given and Trance tore down the course. His mind seemed to go three different directions, one, yeah he had a hard time not thinking about Corena and simply focusing on qualifying with the mace, second he couldn’t let Mandor best him again even if it didn’t bother him, and third when and where could his attacker strike. Any of these thoughts plus a few more crept in could be fatal to him here or somewhere in the future on a battlefield.

His arm ached as he smashed his way through each of his automaton targets. For the first time he smashed one target he took a glance over at Mandor. They were neck and neck and to his surprise Mandor glanced back at him. The look on Mandor’s face was near mischievous. Was that a friendly challenge? Then let’s go he thought and turned with renewed effort and after his last target lost its head he rumbled across the finish line a mere heartbeat ahead of Mandor.

Both young men collapsed trying to catch their breath that became harder when they would look at each other and start laughing then coughing and laughing again. Looking up from the ground, Trance looked up into Shulthur’s face.

“So having robot knights with razor sharp swords after you isn’t enough. You two technically tied and both of you barely missed the course record. I trust that you’ll let me know if you need the medics. If you’re not dying you need to get up so you don’t get trampled by your squad mates as they take this course,” Shulthur said and turned trying not to smile.

Still laughing and coughing, Trance turned and crawled to his hands and knees. Shakily he made it to his feet and with shaking arms he hefted his shield and mace. He noticed that Mandor was also having trouble standing. Together they stumbled back to join the squad. Just as he was getting settled, it dawned on him that his one weakness was up next and he still had a few more events to attempt to qualify followed by the march and the tower. How much energy had he used, did he have enough reserves to get him to the top of the tower.

Archery, it seemed like everyone was good with a bow. Trance had trained and trained and finally it was here. After qualifying with the mace he had found a spot to sit down for only a moment before Shulthur was leading them to the archery field. Strangely he was able to appear calmer than he felt. If he showed how nervous he was as he got his bow and strung the bowstring he would be walking on knees shaking so bad he might actually fall down. With great effort he focused and reached for the quiver of arrows that he was going to use to attempt to qualify with when he was distracted by another official.

“I have his quiver here,” said the man as he stepped forward.

The first official with a quiver just an inch away from Trance’s hand, looked up annoyed at the interruption, “I have his quiver right here. These are his official arrows.”

“May I remind you of who I am Hoorl,” said the official.

Hoorl glared at the man and replied, “I sure do Captain Camier, just let me do my job. I’m giving this young man his quiver.”

“I am now going to give you an order Sergeant, give me that quiver and let me inspect those arrows,” Camier said.

Hoorl looked almost like he’d been caught committing a crime. Reluctantly he handed the quiver over and Camier took an arrow out as Trance looked on wondering what the issue was. It was then that he started to notice what Camier had seen. The arrows fletching were very slightly ruffled, not much, but it could impact how straight the arrow would fly. Also the shaft had the slightest bend and finally the broad arrow head could use to be sharpened. Camier looked at Hoorl with a questioning look. “Did you inspect these arrows?”

Hoorl was desperate trying to look innocent. This was not supposed to happen. “Well, I did inspect a quiver for this young man. I suppose it was that quiver.”

“You suppose. Either you inspected this quiver or you did not. Which is it, because someone failed to see that these arrows are useless to anyone trying to qualify for archery,” Camier said.

“Sir, I don’t know about those arrows, the ones I saw were perfectly fine. I have no idea how that quiver got here,” Hoorl declared.

“Curious, these quivers are held in a secure area for qualifying so someone switched them. I am putting you on notice that there will be an investigation. Now, Sonderson, here is the quiver for you to use, I guarantee that these arrows will fly straight.”

Trance took the quiver and slung it on his back. He stepped to the line and drew his first arrow and was surprised. It looked like it had just been manufactured and in pristine condition. The thought struck him that it was now up to him and his skill. If he succeeded or failed it was now just on him.

“Hey Trance,” said Mandor, “Just remember what you kept telling us, you can do this.” He flexed his arm with his bow and reached back for his first arrow and nocked it.

Trance looked at his bow and taking a breath he slowly raised it and drew his first arrow. So the time was now. Twenty arrows, ten for the target, and ten for the three spread out knights. Possibly the fourth one if he could hit the three he needed. As he looked down the range he noticed more knight targets. That’s right, he remembered that at qualifying there was the potential to score higher if you not only hit the qualifying knights you could hit some of the others. Several of the archers he knew were quite capable of easily scoring the eighty-five points and hitting several of the knights. The official gave the signal for him and Mandor to draw and shoot.

Twang went his bowstring as his first arrow left his bow and flew. Trance tried to relax his breathing as the arrow struck the target, not a bad start scoring eight. He drew his second arrow and let it fly and was near ecstatic with a nine. Then reality hit as his third arrow only scored seven. Another arrow and scored eight, he could breathe easier. His mind whirred and he remembered something Corena had shown him on how to aim so he relaxed and sent his next three arrows down and scored three nines. This was great but he still had three arrows to go. He set his next arrow and was slightly bothered to score eight. He could still make it. Once again he focused on what Corena had shown him and aimed just barely higher and zang his arrow flew and the noise from the crowd was near deafening as he scored a bulls-eye. Ten points giving him seventy-seven points, he only needed eight more to qualify with this part of archery.

“Way to go,” shouted Mandor.

Trance smiled for a moment and refocused and drew his tenth arrow for the target shoot. He drew and braced himself as he sighted down to the target and then let the arrow fly. Nine, and he almost let himself collapse. He’d done it by a miracle; he scored eighty-six, one more than he needed. Now he had ten arrows to take out the three knight targets.

His first arrow clanged and bounced away. No problem, just send another arrow. It also bounced off the target. Okay, you made it this far with the Lord’s help you can make it the rest of the way. He sent his third arrow and whack; it sank in the target knight’s neck. Great, one down, yet he had more arrows to shoot. He sighted down and this time it took two arrows to take out the second target. Five arrows and only one target left. He let himself relax, but each arrow went clattering away off the armor. Strange he thought as he recounted that on arrow number eight hit what he had found was the vulnerable spot on Boulthorian’s armor. He closed his eyes and said a silent prayer for this arrow to find its mark. His arms seemed to move without thought and in a moment he drew his ninth arrow and let it fly. This was one of those moments that seemed to stand still as the arrow seemed to fly slowly down the field and then thunk. The third target was struck and the crowd screamed. Everyone knew that he had succeeded and qualified. He nearly did not care as he drew his last arrow with that same strange calm and let fly his last arrow and he turned with his arms out as his squad rushed up to him and raised him off his feet. He would hear a few minutes later that his last arrow had taken down the fourth target knight right in the heart.

Just by chance Trance looked back to the place where the target knights were and noticed the first two target knights. Strange, for a moment it looked like there was something on the heart of those targets. Before he could ask anything about them he was whisked aside by his friends congratulating him.

“Hey, you need to look over there,” Zam said and pointed.

Trance looked to where his friend pointed and saw Corena beaming at him. She raised a hand and made a signal that made his heart leap. It was a signal that she made up that clearly said, “I love you!”

Trance smiled back and raised his hand and made the same sign. Now he could relax some even though he had more events to go. It seemed a long time to reach the final event and more squads were out going through the courses. Trance would hear that an archer friend, or at least team and squad mate of Rex had nearly a perfect score on the archery field. Wow, he must be amazing. One other bit of gossip got to his ear, when Rex qualified with his sword he had scored five points behind Trance and five seconds behind as well. He didn’t have much time to think about that as he prepared to lead his squad to the tower.

Truly exhausted now, Trance took his place and Shulthur directed the squad to march. They were right behind Corena’s squad and Trance could see that the young ladies were as exhausted as him. He knew Corena was in the lead and he prayed for her to have the strength to make it to the top of the tower. He wasn’t sure about himself at that moment. Just another step, and another, I can make it. I have to make it.

On the march went on its epic tour toward Ezra’s Tower. What awaited them was not very clear to him, but he knew this was his last test to pass to be a Golden Griffin. Already some of the trainers were talking to some that had fallen behind. Trance knew he could not look back but the voices drifted up to him. He pushed forward and heard his friends breathing just as heavily as he was. Hamon was right behind him and staggered another step and nearly stopped.

Before Trance could look back and help his friend Hamon spoke, “I’m all right. Keep going, you're doing great. We believe in you. I’ll help you out if you need. Trust me, you are more important.”

“I’m not that important,” Trance retorted.

“I don’t know what it is, but something has spoken to my spirit that you must make it to the top of the tower,” Hamon said.

Trance was taken with that comment. He was surprised and pleased by what he heard yet how he should react. Two thoughts crossed his mind and he momentarily struggled before reminding himself to keep humble. He humbly smiled back at his friend and turned back to the march. Slowly they marched on and Trance saw a few girls from Corena’s squad that had fallen behind. One girl in particular was in tears as she sat on the ground and two female knight trainers knelt down and talked to her. Zam had told Trance that even if you fell way behind your squad you still had a chance to make it to the top of the tower. It didn’t matter when a prospect made it to the top of the tower, if you made it up to the top you became a Golden Griffin. Another step and Trance felt his leg muscles start to burn. Another step and a deep breath and a glance told him that many in his squad were struggling like he was. They were the first male squad and that carried a lot of prestige and weight. Right left, he tried to keep in mind as he did his best to focus on his breathing and taking his next step. Mile after mile he and his squad pushed on and more young ladies and some young men started to fall behind.

Finally Trance realized as his legs burned more and his side started to ache that they were past the halfway mark in the march and he could see the tower getting closer. He pushed on and took another step and breathed deeply to keep oxygen flowing in him. Even in the cool air sweat was freely flowing down his face, soon he’d need to wipe his face to keep sweat out of his eyes. Three quarters of the way. Keep going he kept thinking. Another mile down and soon they were now headed on the final stretch to the tower. Every step brought them ever closer to their goal. Trance had a moment of delight as he caught sight of Corena making her first step into the tower. Row after row of Corena’s squad entered the tower and Trance knew he was almost finally to his dream. He sucked in more air and pushed himself to continue forward and felt more than saw his friends close in to aid him at a moments notice. With his next step he finally entered the tower, wonder surged through him and he stopped. Keep going, you're almost there. Yeah, but I have to climb to the top. Really!

They turned a corner and started up the second level. How many levels are in this tower? Another turn and they were up another level. Trance could not remember the last time he hurt this bad. It seemed that every muscle was now electrified and on fire. The next level was in sight and he marched toward it. He tried to clear his mind and think, how many more levels did he have left. Half way he stumbled and nearly went down. Two levels up and he did drop and before he could react Hamon was lifting him to his feet on his right and Gracer had his left arm. At the next level Mandor and Zam went down and Trance lifted Mandor, and Hamon lifted Zam to their feet. Now only three levels were left, Corena and her squad were one level up and almost there with slightly over two thirds of the squad. The rest were still struggling to make it, many marched with Trance’s squad.

“You know,” puffed out Zam, “That when we get there the girls with us will be raised to Goldens with us. How cool is that.” Zam took another deep breath and fell to his knees. This time Hamon nearly went down helping his friend to his feet.

“That’s okay with me,” Trance said, feeling very hoarse. “I never knew getting to this point and having my dream right here would hurt this bad. I wonder how Rex is fairing.”

“Don’t …know and don’t care,” Hamon panted as he nearly stumbled and Trance took his arm to keep him on his feet.

They were nearly there and Trance through his pain felt excited for Corena and knew she had made it to the top. His legs hurt more than he had ever experienced and he took another step and saw the sky and knew he was almost to the top of the tower, the opening was just ahead of him. New energy seemed to surge in him and he blocked everything from his mind as he concentrated on taking his next step and there they were.

Immediately Trance spotted Corena and her squad being rushed to chairs for them to finally sit and catch their breaths. At a glance he spotted an elevator at the far end and he assumed it was for the new Golden Griffins to ride down the tower. Shulthur came forward to encourage the squad to take the last few steps to the waiting group of knights there at the top and in front was King Maximus.

Trance took his last few struggling steps and stopped. He didn’t have time to think of anything as he and his squad were bidden to kneel. With fiercely shaking legs Trance knelt and suddenly felt hands on his shoulders. A quick glance told him that everyone had their right hand out on the man in front of them until all of the squad and the young ladies kneeling with them had their right hand on the person ahead of them and all ending with Hamon’s hand on Trance’s right shoulder.

“Men and some ladies,” intoned the King, “You came to this tower as knights of this kingdom, defenders of our freedoms. There are many oaths that you have taken and many more will be entrusted to you. You have had many challenges and overcome them and you have made it finally to the top of Ezra’s tower. Now by my right as King of the kingdom of Cator it is my honor and distinct privilege to anoint you as Golden Griffins,” and Maximus lifted his sword and placed it on Trance’s right shoulder and atop Hamon’s hand. “Rise as Golden Griffins and remember your duty to defend this great kingdom and the planet Althora. I charge you to live with courtesy, honor and integrity. Always make your priority the defense of the weak and innocent. Now rise and take your rest and may God bless you and ever be your guide, Till the Breaking of the Sky.”

It was done. Trance had done it; he was now a Golden Griffin, however, as he tried to rise his knees buckled and he went down and laid on his back. To his surprise it was Maximus and Shulthur who lifted him to his feet and nearly dragged him to a chair. He sat for a moment stunned and almost fell out of the chair from exhaustion when a form nearly crashed into him and he nearly didn’t know what to do when a set of rose shaped lips pressed against his. For a moment that could have lasted eternity he wrapped his arms around Corena and kissed her back before the two of them tumbled to the tower floor laughing and lying there looking up at the sky.

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In his private quarters on Boulthora, Axlor sat at his kythersig. On screen were two figures, one for the first time was not pixelated yet distinctly covered up to hide his identity was Dew, the other was equally disguised. Dew spoke up, “King Axlor, highness, this is, let’s just call him Eroth. He has been pursuing the young man from Earth,” said Dew in a flat hoarse voice.

“If my sources are correct Eroth, thus far you have failed in your hunt for this Earth boy. I am curious to know why, if you are such a fantastic archer as Dew claimed, is he still among us, and not resting in his grave. You can consider yourself fortunate that I have learned to trust Dew’s reports and instincts. So I will allow you to continue this hunt. Do not fail me and put an arrow or bolt, your choice, in his heart,” said Axlor as he reclined back and waited.

“Your highness, by my life I will remove him from the living,” said Eroth in a strong young man’s voice.

“Now Dew, what else do you have to report,” Axlor asked his spy.

“Just one more item my Lord. All is going well, King Maximus has been persuaded to let his daughter be appointed captain of her own division and she will assuredly be stationed at Pikes Head. She is about to enter our hand. The net is closing and they are not even aware. Soon the Earth boy will be no more and Corena will be ours, uh, yours,” said Dew in a delighted voice that might have revealed some of his real self.

Chapter 22

A Date of Promises

It had been a more relaxed month for Trance so far. He had indeed achieved his dream to be a Golden Griffin and now he did his best to fill his time as he waited to be appointed to a division and then the real work could begin. It had been long believed to be best that after the Golden Griffin recruits had endured eight months of training and a grueling qualification day that the new Golden Griffins needed a break before being commissioned and going on their first missions. While many new Golden Griffins went out and celebrated and pursued a variety of activities, some good for their souls keeping themselves in good shape, and others activities that warped and darkened already dark souls.

Corena had a few obligations she had to keep before returning at the middle of the month. With her away for a short time Trance kept busy by keeping in touch with his family and the Markems as well as taking extra classes at the GrindStone. He hoped to refine some of his skills to hopefully earn a place with one of the top divisions. There was always the one he thought about most.

On Corena’s return she took Trance on a few dates. The zoo, art museum as well as the museum of nature, and a couple motion pictures were some of their usual dates. Tonight, the night before they would get their commissions Trance was at Corena’s apartment on base. They sat together on her two-seat couch. Corena was cuddled into the cRook of Trance’s right arm as they sat back and watched the latest ‘Doctor Renain’ mystery. Trance couldn’t help smiling as he watched the episode.

Without surprise Doctor Renain pieced together the clues that lead to her identifying the perpetrator, this time an archer who wore a pure white porcelain mask. As the archer was led away in shackles between two sheriffs, Doctor Renain turned and headed away. The next scene showed her in her apartment in a very flattering dress with a goblet of wine waiting. In a moment there was a knock on her door. She went and opened the door and Trance was only slightly surprised that her date was the super shy and extremely intelligent Deputy Sheriff Gaillon Lukes. Trance was impressed that the author had made this choice of her romantic interest rather than the smooth and well-spoken and debonair handsome Sheriff Launcell Velain. The actor's performance was perfect as the shy Deputy slowly entered the room and was taken by surprise as Doctor Renain set down her goblet and shut the door before taking Gaillon and kissing him, a moment later the credits rolled.

“That was a very pleasant surprise. I was sure they would have her connect with Launcell the way they kept building the tension between them,” Trance said.

“Well I have to say that I knew it,” Corena said with a wink.

“How,” Trance asked, “I didn’t see this coming. I’m not complaining, I think this was a great switch. I can’t wait to see what happens in next week's episode.”

Corena turned in Trance’s arm and looked at him with a knowing look. “I kept thinking about who I would choose between the two. Of course there is the suave and very handsome Launcell, but that was the obvious choice. So I kept watching the subtle way they were building the relationship between Doctor Renain and Gaillon. I think the author made the best choice like I have. Also I think they did excellent casting and the actor playing Gaillon is just as I see him when I read the novels.”

“I have to agree. The actor is a handsome guy, not quite as dashing as the actor portraying Launcell. And you’re right they have been building the relationship between them. All the ways he has tried to talk to her and not quite getting what he wanted to really say. I know what that is like,” Trance said, and like a guy he seemed to have missed part of what she said.

Corena blushed slightly and finally looked a bit guilty and reached behind her. “I have to confess something. I cheated and got something for you,” she said and handed him a wrapped package. She watched expectantly as he carefully unwrapped the package and true surprise crossed his face and he looked at a special edition novel of Doctor Renain with the title the same as the episode they had just finished watching, “Doctor Renain and the Pale Archer.” The cover art looked like it had been taken from the episode also. “I had the pleasure of meeting the author while I was on break and told her about you and she even signed it for you,” she said with her face aglow.

Trance took the novel in his hand and opened the cover and written in a fine hand, “Thank you Trance, a true friend of Doctor Renain and Corena’s ‘Gaillon,’ hint hint. Caroul Delore.”

Corena’s smile broadened mischievously, “I also have to confess I got one for myself and I read it. I’m sorry, I could not let you know and give away the surprise. Do you like it,” she asked feeling slightly nervous.

For answer Trance leaned forward and kissed her. “I love it.” He looked down and reread the signature and message and suddenly it occurred to him and he looked up with a curious smile. “So, is this saying that I’m your Gaillon?” With this thought his brain spun and suddenly it came to him and he suddenly knew who must have been her Launcell. He looked into her eyes with the question still in his mind.

Corena saw the question and answered, “Yes, I did have a very suave guy as you know, and indeed he was my real first love. But, as I think back on it, like most girls my age I wanted the suave handsome and powerful manly and in some ways a dangerous guy. However, at the time, I did not think about what that meant and who he truly was. And then along comes you.” She smiled and reached her right hand and gently touched his cheek. “Never think you were my second choice. You stepped into my life and I was intrigued.”

“What about me intrigued you. I’m not that special,” Trance asked.

“Well for starters you are handsome, don’t look at me that way, you are. Not the same as Rex, but you are very handsome, maybe more now than when we first met. Then there is the way you treat people. You are very respectful to most everyone, especially our parents. Plus there is the way you are on the field,” she said.

“Not sure about the handsome part, but you can thank my Gram for me being respectful. She tried to beat that into all of us grandkids,” he joked. Gram had been a wonderful role model for how to behave and an example to look up to. “What is it I do on the field? I don’t do anything special out there.”

“Oh yes you do,” Corena said. “You are a true leader, not like Rex who sent out all of his team out in front of him and he directed them from behind. You actually took the lead, and it isn’t just that you stood up for your men and defended them when they were down and fought for them, putting yourself in danger and ready to sacrifice yourself for them. That is extremely rare. Whether you think so or not, that is so brave and noble and dangerous. Have you thought about what would happen in a real battle?”

Trance sat back in thought and didn’t hesitate to answer, “I do think about it all of the time. If I am ever promoted as a captain I want to lead my men by example. In the event that I am slain in a battle, my hope would be that someone would follow my example. Also, when I assist a man that goes down or is in serious trouble, I hope the favor is returned, not only to me but to some other man that may be in trouble. I would want all of my men to follow and protect each other. To be honest, thank you for the compliment. This is a dream come true for me to be a knight, even better I am now a Golden Griffin.”

“I have no doubt that you will be a captain, or even higher. I think the cliché is that it is a matter of when. You have other qualities, gallantry, honesty, and loyalty, most of the qualities that would make you a good husband, mine and no one else’s, and a very good king,” Corena said.

Trance froze. “Your husband. I cannot lie, I have thought about it and we have talked about this before, I just, well, you are the princess. I am still very nervous dating you.”

“I am not nervous,” Corena said as she moved closer to him. “And I have thought about it a lot, and dreamed of it. Now you know how I feel, I love you and I want you.”

Trance felt his pulse increase and his breathing slow. “I love you too and would love to marry you.” He reached out and gently touched her cheek. “As I recall when we talked we would marry in a couple years after we, or rather I had earned enough to provide for you for the rest of your life.”

Corena cocked her head and looked at him in an amused skeptical way. “Uh Trance, I am the princess,” she smiled to reassure him. “I think we’ll be okay.”

Trance took a moment to ponder what Corena said and he suddenly remembered, “Well even if we eventually marry, I don’t think there would be any chance of me being king. I’m from Earth and don’t you have to be born here to be king.” He thought for a moment and asked curiously, “What does the law say if we are married and you do eventually become queen?”

Corena smiled and reflected for a moment. She had looked into it five months back and dreamed of him asking her this very question. “Do you think I hadn’t already checked into this, the law says that you have to be a true citizen of Althora and of the Kingdom of Cator. It just happens that I also looked it up and according to the law you are a true citizen of this planet and kingdom, so you don’t have anything to worry about.”

Trance smiled bashfully, “Yeah I do. I don’t know anything about being royal or ruling a kingdom and I certainly don’t have any desire to be king. I only want to serve as a Golden Griffin and maybe eventually lead my own division, and yes I would very much like to marry you someday.”

“I don’t want to become queen either so you know. I can’t wait to be your wife. For tonight however, I don’t want to be alone,” she reached over and touched his face and read the sudden excited shock that crossed his face. “We don’t have to do anything, just sleep here with me tonight. I have never slept with anyone before, no, not even Rex. I do mean sleep, just to feel you lying in bed beside me for one night.”

Trance trembled slightly as Corena’s finger touched his lips. “I think I can be persuaded to stay the night. Just to sleep.” Feelings clashed like swords as he thought about this night and he kissed her passionately again.

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The dream was starting to fade as his eye’s fluttered. It had been a very personal and sexy dream. Trance had dreamed he was in his Golden Griffin dress uniform and was standing in the front of the church that he attended. Suddenly there was a burst of music, what sounded like trumpets, flutes, and some stringed instruments similar to violins. He felt his heart race, was it real or dream, as he turned to look down the central aisle and in a moment he took in a packed church, every seat taken and even many people standing in the back. Then he saw her.

She was radiant in a stunning burgundy velvet dress. Walking arm in arm with her was her father, King Maximus. Trance had never seen or even dreamed of Corena being so beautiful. It only took moments, or hours; who knows in dreams, for her to be by his side. Then a blur, and yet somehow he knew every moment and word as they wed. Rings were exchanged and they were introduced as man and wife. The party afterwards was amazing and then they were at a luxurious hotel room and she was coming toward him wearing…

He awoke. His eyes fluttered for a moment longer as consciousness crept back into his mind. Dang, Trance thought as he tried to remember the dream as it floated away. He yawned and stretched and as usual felt nature’s call, or a full bladder when it slowly dawned on him that something was different. In fact several things seemed to crash on his consciousness at once. For one this bed had a headboard and his bed in his room did not. Second, this room had a door to a bathroom, he had a room in the barracks now and the bathroom was in the hall. Now that he was more awake it suddenly occurred to him that he was not alone and it was at that moment that a faint scent floated in and his brain nearly froze at the thought. A girl is in my bed; or rather I’m in a girl’s bed. Slowly the memory of the night before came to him and as it did he looked down and he breathed relief as he noticed the pajama pants. That was when he reached back.

Near electric shock hit him as his right hand touched a bare thigh. He couldn’t move and his heart wanted to pulse out of his chest. What should I do? Trance did not want to disturb her, he was sure he knew who was beside him. Carefully he looked back, and just because he wasn’t sure what to do he left his hand on Corena’s thigh. He took another slow deep breath as he gazed at her near angelic face that looked so pure and content and he listened to her slow easy breathing of sleep. He let his eyes take in her sleeping form and noticed her elegant nightgown that had slid up exposing most of her thigh. Should he look more or look away. He knew what he should do as a gentleman and his usual shyness, however, the other half of his brain fired up and he wanted to know more. He sucked in a very deep breath and let his usual nature win and he lifted his hand slowly and turned his head to the bathroom door.

As Trance turned his head and lifted his hand Corena grinned. She had enjoyed sleeping next to him last night and feeling his warmth next to her. She even enjoyed his shyness and nervousness and she felt her body respond to his male heat. She was not expecting that and part of her wanted to reach out and grab him. Breath, she told herself, there will be a better time for that. For now she wanted to enjoy his reactions and for fun kept her eyes closed imagining him beside her. Just as Trance was about to move she spoke, “Where are you going?”

Again Trance found he could not move. Swiftly he looked back and was surprised to see a soft grin on Corena’s lips. It took him a moment to respond, “Uh, I need to, uh, you know, well, I got to go, uh bathroom not leave.” His face seemed to light on fire and flame.

“It’s okay. Go do your thing and after you get back I’ll get up and shower,” her heart beat faster. He’s got to see my face color. “And after I’m out you can shower also and then we can leave for breakfast together.” Oh Trance, she thought, you have no idea of what I’m thinking about at this moment. She had not forgotten the idea she had been planning. Today is the day for that, and soon we can get to more.

With an act of will to keep his knees from shaking as he walked to the bathroom door and went in. He took care of his needs and washed his hands and quickly looked around. There were a couple woodland pictures on the wall, one featuring a velops, and the other a graceful waterfall. Two luxurious towels and a matching washcloth were hung near the tub shower. Sitting next to the sink was one of the latest electronic toothbrushes, and on the wall was an electronic dispenser with three spouts, toothpaste, hand soap, and lotion. There was also an electric hand dryer that he used before turning and opening the door to go back to bed while Corena showered. Curious, she was not in bed.

As Trance stepped out of the bathroom and wondered for a moment as to where Corena had gone, he heard a gentle footstep from the bedroom door. His head swung to the sound and he caught his breath as Corena stood in the bedroom doorway in her nightgown and again he felt his male fire. At that very instant Corena felt her heart race and felt her body respond, another time, but I want, flashed through her brain. She knew her face had flushed and instinctively she knew he had to have seen it. Well got to go with it. “I’ve got to shower,” she said as she walked toward the bathroom. Trance was about to step out of the way and she grabbed him and planted a very passionate kiss on his lips. Now her face glowed as she left him standing there as she walked past and shut the bathroom door.

Trance walked to the bed with numerous romantic thoughts crossing his brain. Should he act on any of them or wait, maybe there would be a better time. Maybe she had wanted him and he had not acted. No, that was not the case, her kiss just now told him that. Relax, take a breather, and lay down. He lay down on the bed and rolled to his side that faced the bathroom door. His eyes, which had started to close, popped wide open when he saw that the door was not closed all of the way.

The door was only open just a couple inches, not much, but as he lay there looking at the door Trance saw Corena walk past still in her nightgown. What should I do? Roll over, close my eyes, keep looking, all possibilities flowed through. Then to his surprise she passed the door and he saw her nude backside and a very slight view of the side of her graceful bosom. Then she walked out of view and he heard the shower and curious he heard Corena hum and sing a verse of a romantic song. Wow, and then he had a thought, did she know about the door or not. He laid back and savored the memories they were making and took some deep breaths and he laid back and closed his eyes.

“All right, the shower is yours,” Corena said as she stepped out of the bathroom in a bathrobe and her nightgown in her right hand. Her brown eyes twinkled with a mischievous light. With a force of will she kept from breaking out laughing at his flushed face as his eyes opened and took her in.

“Uh, all right,” Trance responded and he got out of bed and he felt his body flush and face flame more as he brushed past her. Wait, did she stand there on purpose. His face flamed more as he shut the bathroom door behind him. Now that he was wide awake he looked the bathroom over and to his surprise he saw that there was a bathrobe hanging for him. How had he missed that earlier when he was here? Then he noticed next to the sink a new electric toothbrush as well as a brand new sleek electric shaver and a bottle of aftershave. His heart welled up and he reached down to undress and make his way to the shower when he thought he felt a slight draft and he glanced up at the mirror and his heart seemed to skip, the door was slightly ajar.

Very self-consciously he quickly stepped in the tub-shower and turned the water on. In the shower was another electronic dispenser with three spouts, shampoo, conditioner, and liquid soap. All sorts of thoughts flowed around his mind as he washed. All too soon his luxurious shower was over and he stepped out to dry. He toweled off and without thinking stepped in front of the sink and used the new toothbrush and then shaved with the new electric shaver. It occurred to him that he should have been more modest as he noticed that the bathroom door was still slightly open. Should he turn and close the door or not. Looking down at himself he decided to finish and after applying the aftershave lotion he donned the bathrobe all without turning around.

Now covered he turned almost cautiously, opened the door and stepped back into the bedroom and immediately he saw Corena already dressed and she was at that moment putting on a pendant that Trance had given her on her birthday. He was amazed at how attractive she was wearing a light duty uniform of dark brown pants with a light tan blouse. The silver pendant shaped like a heart with what reminded Trance of a Celtic looped heart inside and at the center was a brilliant dark red garnet hung attractively. “I’ll let you get dressed in peace,” Corena said as she turned to him. Before he got a foot further in the room she came up and planted a quick kiss on his lips and headed out of the bedroom and shut the door behind her.

Trance had to take a relaxing breath before striding to his overnight bag and retrieving his clothes for the day. He also had a light duty uniform of black pants and a royal blue shirt. Just as he was putting on his left shoe Corena called to him. “Make sure you pack your toothbrush and shaver. They are for you.”

“Thank you,” Trance called back. After tying his shoe he went back to the bathroom to retrieve the toothbrush and razor. He carefully packed them in his bag and then carried it out of the bedroom to the cozy living room where Corena was waiting for him on her couch. He set his bag down and suddenly felt funny. It suddenly dawned on him that they were probably getting their commissions and orders today, maybe this morning, and the shuddering thought of when would they get to spend time together like this again. It took a serious force of will to keep a tear from his eye.

Corena saw the look in his eyes and understood. This was the perfect time for her plan, how long before he sees it. She stood up and planted a kiss. “Are you ready to go and find out where you’ll be serving?”

“I think so, yet I have to confess that I’m a bit nervous. This is finally my dream come true, yet where will I be commissioned to serve. It would be fantastic to serve under Major Marlett, and I know that you’ll get a fantastic position. I truly hope you get to serve where you want,” Trance said.

“I have no doubt that you’ll get a great commission. Now my own, I’m sure I’ll be just as surprised as everyone. Now, I’m hungry, are you ready,” she said as she made her way to the door.

“Yeah, I’m ready for breakfast. A shame that we only had last night together,” Trance said as he bent over to pick up his bag.

“Don’t worry, I have complete faith that we’ll do this again,” Corena said. She headed for the door and did her best not to look back at him for a moment.

Trance had been momentarily distracted so his bag still lay on the floor. Now as he reached to pick the bag up his eye went to the couch and an open magazine. Strange he had not seen it there before, in fact he could not recall seeing this magazine before. His curiosity was aroused and he leaned forward and got a closer look at what he now recognized as a jewelry catalog and highlighted on the open page was an elegant gleaming wedding set. The engagement ring looked like either silver or white gold and in a loop design and the stone was a marquee cut red stone. The color was a cross between a deep red garnet and a ruby and the description called it Flaming Heart Empirite. I wonder, he thought as he glanced at Corena at the door. Did she want me to see this, if so why. Then things that she had said the night before came clearly into focus. He took another moment to memorize the ring and where it was sold. With more confidence his hand closed on the bag's handle and he lifted it up and he strode to follow Corena to the door. Deep inside he knew that his future was awaiting him.

Chapter 23

The Commission and Summons

Trance and Corena stepped out into the hall outside her apartment. Corena stopped to close and lock the door. She turned and caught the look in Trance’s eye and knew he had seen what she wanted him to see. As they started walking down the hall the fourth door on their left opened. Trance was pleasantly surprised and slightly embarrassed to find that it was Hamon, who was fully dressed, and Amanda, Hamon’s girlfriend who was only wearing a bathrobe. Trance immediately swung his eyes as Amanda’s heaving cleavage was exposed.

“Oh, look who’s coming,” Amanda declared, “Corena, I’m so excited to see you. Look, I have to show you.” She continued and unabashedly she almost ran up to Corena and showed her left hand.

Trance joined Corena and tried to keep his eyes focused only on Amanda’s left hand and in particular ring finger. Sparkling there was a gold ring with some delicate etching and a fair sized amethyst. Instantly he knew and turned to Hamon, “Congratulations! You are a lucky guy.” He extended his hand to Hamon who instead wrapped his arms around him.

“How wonderful Amanda,” Corena said in her gracious voice. “I am so excited for you.”

“This is amazing that you are the first to know. Hamon was so gallant and romantic. I came to surprise him and wow, he sure surprised me,” Amanda said and hugged Corena.

“Congratulations,” Trance told Amanda who instantly turned and hugged him.

“One more thing,” Hamon said, “I was going to ask you when I saw you later today but right now is perfect. Would you be my best man?”

Trance was humbled by the question. “Hamon, I would be so honored,” he responded and was in a moment once again being bear hugged by his friend.

“Corena,” said Amanda almost hesitantly, “would you do me the honor of being one of my bridesmaids. I would have you be the most honored but I had promised it to my dear friend Myliss.” She hoped that she had not offended the princess in any way and was so excited at the prospect that her royal highness would be at her wedding party.

Corena smiled and hugged Amanda back. All she felt was happy excitement for the newly engaged couple and she was honored to be a part of their happiness. “As the royal princess, I will be honored to stand with you on your wedding day. I will make arrangements that wherever I am stationed that you may contact me during all of your planning. Also, I will authorize and give you any assistance that you require. All you have to do is ask. Don’t worry about not asking or even thinking you are asking too much.”

Amanda blushed and hugged Corena again and gave into full laughter. Corena then stepped up and hugged and congratulated Hamon. Amanda, still giggling with excitement, looked down at herself and now she felt only slightly embarrassed. “Oh my, I forgot. I guess I should go get dressed.” She kissed Hamon and sprinted back into her apartment. In her haste she didn’t close the door and the three friends patiently waited for her to get dressed. Soon she returned and closed the door and the two couples turned and headed for the exit.

They walked and talked on their way to the cafeteria. As they went along they met more friends and other newly graduated Golden Griffins. Most conversations that Trance caught snippets of were about the commissions and who would be heading where. Those Golden Griffins, the young men and women that knew Hamon, were thrilled at his engagement and gave their congratulations. It was as they were taking seats at a table that a rather unwelcome group came by.

Oh this figures, Trance thought. He was so happy for his friend, but here was Rex strolling by, this was not going to be friendly. He hoped Rex would just walk by, oh no. Rex stopped and clearly made it obvious that he checked out Amanda as she sat next to Hamon. Trance watched Hamon’s eyes flash dragon fire at Rex’s approach.

“Hello there, do you know that you are like a precious rare jewel and like a jewel you need to be in a unique and precious setting. Why don’t you come sit with us in the gold section instead of sitting here with the what, ah, the zincs,” Rex said.

“I appreciate the compliment, but I am in the right mindset,” Amanda said and she flipped her left hand and put it on Hamon. With a sweet smile she leaned closer to her new fiancé and continued, “This is the most precious setting, and I think you and your friends are unfortunately in the, what did you say the zinc, no I think tin might be more appropriate. Gee, what must Jezzafer say, you trying to get an engaged lady to come sit with you.”

Rex’s face under his gold blonde hair flashed in flame. “I think I must have been mistaken, you are just a piece of …” he got no further as suddenly Hamon stood right up to him. “Oh, what is this? Do you feel threatened by me Hamon? I think you should.” Rex said as he stood at his full height of six feet two inches compared to Hamon who stood six feet even.

“I am not threatened by you, and no I am not going to threaten you. I am simply going to tell you that if you come near my future wife again I will send you to the emergency medical room. Now if you please, I think you should move on,” Hamon said, looking Rex straight in the eye.

Rex barely blinked and moved dangerously closer to Hamon. “You might better back down or I may send you back to the forge like a junk piece of slag.” Some of Rex’s comrades closed in to back up their leader.

This show of force did not intimidate Hamon. He knew very well what Rex and his friends were capable of from his school days in the knight’s class competitions. He had no fear of them even though under their number he would probably go down. Well he’d take a few of them down first. Suddenly the tension increased, as he was no longer alone. Trance was on his feet beside him on his right and his best friend from school Jalthord was on his left. Immediately Gracer, Zam, Mandor, and Lamden among several others were right with him. Now it was Rex and his guy’s that were outnumbered.

Sometimes Rex didn’t know when to quit; this was one of those times. “I must have been mistaken. There is nothing precious here. Let’s go, I see some precious jewels over there. Oh and hello princess, how you shine in the sewer.” He turned without flinching and sauntered across the room closely followed by his friends.

At that Corena who had all this time remained sitting with Amanda rose and Trance immediately turned to hold her back. Finally Hamon took the lead and sat back down and felt fury for a few more seconds before Amanda put her hand on his shoulder and pulled him close, “He wouldn’t know a precious jewel if one the size of a boulder fell on him.” With that the tension gradually faded away as again everyone sat and got back to more pleasant conversations.

Just as Trance took another bite of his breakfast he noticed a dozen officers enter the cafeteria. As he watched four of them brought in large baskets filled with parchment scrolls, the commissions. Then the dozen officers each took two scrolls apiece and looked at them in turn and started off to deliver them. He took another bite and tried to relax his mind, he would get his commission in time and see what it said then. Just as he was taking another bite one of the officers stepped up and presented a commission to Corena. He turned and watched as Corena carefully removed the ribbon and unrolled the scroll.

Corena took a breath and read her commission reading what she expected to see. Suddenly her expression changed, it went from looking pleased to a quizzical look. I guess this is okay, just slightly odd.

“Well what does it say,” Amanda asked, “Surely they made you a captain of your own division. What did they do?” She asked, “Did they make a mistake in your division's emblem?”

Trance and the others leaned toward Corena. She looked up at them with that uncertain look on her face. “So, yes, I am commissioned to be the captain of my own division, the Crimson Pumas. I am to meet my division this afternoon and receive more instructions then my division and I will ride out tomorrow under the new banner. I had picked my division over a week ago so the commissions for it could get to the ladies today. Just one thing though, they are sending us to report to the Pikes Head Rook. I thought my father was going to see that I was stationed at or near the palace.”

“That is odd,” Trance said as more commissions were being handed out. At the corner of his eye he spotted Rex crowing with his friends. Well that fits, he thought, Rex must have gotten his desire. He was almost curious as to where Rex was going to be stationed. Just then a couple officers approached the table and presented commissions to Hamon, Gracer, Mandor, Zam, and finally an officer handed a commission to him.

He sat for a moment and finally untied the ribbon and unrolled his commission. Despite his heart hammering in his chest he found his hands steady holding the important parchment and he concentrated to read. “I, King Maximus Astorene, the King of the Kingdom of Cator of the Planet Althora, do hereby commission Terrance ‘Trance’ Scott Sonderson as a Golden Griffin. I have reviewed your record and found you to be a knight of particular renown. Therefore it is with a great deal of pleasure that I hereby also commission you to the Golden Lynx. As such you shall report with your fellow Golden Griffins to Major Marlett Torland this day at 10:30 EM in front of the Armory. Major Torland will have your current orders. May you have many blessings in your service to the kingdom of Cator and me, till the breaking of the sky. Signed and sealed King Maximus Astorene.”

He could almost not believe what he had just read so he swiftly read the commission again. After his second reading he glanced up at his friends and was nearly surprised that they had all gathered around him. Hamon held out his commission and beamed, “That is fantastic. I have also been commissioned to the Golden Lynx.”

“Funny,” said Gracer who nodded to Mandor and Zam.

Trance looked at his friends. Oh this would be too great. Could all of them be commissioned to the Golden Lynx? Just as he wondered this Lamden strolled up. “Where did you guys get commissioned?”

“We are joining the Golden Lynx,” replied Gracer.

“Where did you get it?” Zam asked.

Lamden looked again at his commission and proudly replied, “I got the Cerulean Crown Cats. I will be stationed at the Ulean Shield Rook. I think it will be exciting to be stationed there just roughly fifteen miles away from the Griffins at Apollis Castle.”

“That’s great,” said Hamon, “That will be exciting. I know you will be fantastic there.”

“Thanks. I gotta get going. I have to meet Major Hardewn in thirty minutes so we can leave right away.” Lamden nodded and headed for the exit.

“Well, I wonder where Lammy is off to,” said the unfriendly voice of Rex as he and a couple companions strolled over.

“He just got commissioned to Ulean Shield Rook with the Cerulean Crown Cats,” Hamon responded as again he came face to face with this rogue. “Where did you get commissioned, you seem to be over excited when you read your scroll.”

“Now now, that isn’t very courteous. I, well we, got commissioned to the Brass Leopards stationed at…” Rex started to brag.

“Fort Vitellan twenty miles away from your home, also where your father is stationed,” Mandor said from his seat. “I don’t know if I would like to serve from there, it really isn’t a very strategic location.”

“You’re correct about it being close to my home and that my father is the base commander. However, you are seriously mistaken as to its strategic location. It guards one of the main roads that leads toward Pikes Head,” said Rex.

“That is quite a ways away from Pikes Head Rook, and there are a few more direct roads to get there now,” Hamon said. He resisted the urge to stand up and slam his fist into Rex’s face. “I don’t recall any of us inviting you over to our table again.” He deliberately looked at his chron and looked back up and said, “I think we should head back to finish up cleaning up our barracks and getting over to the Armory.”

Trance was thankful for his friends, especially for Hamon right now and he stood stretched. Just then he was jerked around. “I hope you know that the Lynx seem to go through a lot of Griffins. Not a good mortality rate as the Lynx are sent on the most dangerous missions. I hope you have an affairs document ready,” Rex said nastily.

Trance had heard this before from many of Rex’s buddies. Yet as he did his own research between his training classes, the Golden Lynx were renowned for being one of the most noble and reliable Golden Griffin divisions and were often sent on important missions. It was true that as they were usually sent to deal with the Boulthorians that many knights and Golden Griffins were slain in these conflicts. This was enough, that’s it, he thought. With a calm, clear voice he said, “I would rather serve with a division that is not afraid of conflict, for that is our duty. Whether my service is long or short, I will do my best to bring honor to my service, and if it is my time and I am sacrificed on the field one day I hope that I will be remembered for my loyalty, love and courage. At least I got commissioned due to my skill and work ethic and not because you think you just deserve it or your dad used his influence. Shame, you are so skilled, yet you want to waste that skill just because you don’t want to get your blade bloody.” Trance turned and headed for the door. It took him a few moments to realize that Corena and his friends were following him and another to realize that the whole room had heard him.

Once outside Trance took a moment to relax then looked at his chron and saw that he had an hour and twenty minutes to go and get his stuff from the barracks plus assist in a quick clean up before reporting to Major Marlett outside the Armory. “Let’s go get our stuff and clean up the barracks,” he said and started off. In an almost natural way he took the lead.

Some minutes later they arrived at their barracks. “Since you guys are getting your stuff and heading to the Armory to meet up with your division, I think I will take Amanda and have a girls day. But first I think we should go to my place, well my place for the moment, and you can use my kytherum. I imagine you have some people you need to talk to,” said Corena. Then in a moment she planted a swift kiss on Trance and turned to head off. Not to be left out Amanda gave Hamon a kiss and hurried to follow the princess.

Slightly breathless, Trance opened the door and went into the barracks. Before he got too far Hamon came up and took him aside. “You know Rex won’t forget what you said and what you have done to him.”

“He had it coming. Forget about what he has done to me; think back to everything he has done to you and your friends. Then there are all the things he did to Corena when they were together. Maybe it was time for someone to finally put him in his place. If I can help it I will not allow him to bully anyone again.” Trance paused to collect his thoughts and continued; “I know it’s possible that I will have to deal with him again, too bad for him. By now everyone should know what he is, that is enough for me.” Then in a more calm voice, “Let’s get packed, we have a schedule to meet.”

As they were packing many of the other young men from their barracks came in to pack as well. Trance noticed that still there were a few that had not come in. Probably they would come later due to their divisions meeting later in the day. After his bags were packed and ready he straightened his bed and joined the others in a quick cleaning of the room. With a broom in hand he and four others swept the floor clean, while Hamon led another three guys in a quick dusting. When they were done the whole room was nearly spotless. Those that came in later would give the room the final touch of a quick mop.

A glance at his chron told him that it was 9:70 EM; occasionally he had to remember that here there were eighty seconds to a minute and eighty minutes to an hour in a twenty-eight hour day with noon at 14:00 AN, after noon, and midnight at 14:00 EM, early morning. Quickly he figured they had forty minutes to meet Major Marlett in front of the Armory, well less to get there on time. In moments though he was distracted as many of the other guys from his barracks started to come over and wish him luck, share stories, and say good-bye. He did the same, wishing them luck and sharing in the tales before shaking their hands as they took their bags and went out to meet their divisions.

As it usually happens, when he looked at his chron, wrist timepiece or what he would call it on earth his watch, it was now 10:14 EM. Gees where did the time go so fast. Trance went to the last couple of young men he had not said good-bye to and regretted that there were still a few he did not get to have a last word with. He tried to recall and he was sure that he had spoken to most of them before going over to see Corena. It surely was time to get going now.

Hamon, Zam, Gracer, and Mandor all must have had the same thought and had their bags in hand and were waiting for him at the door. Unbidden a tear slid down his cheek as he gave the room one last look and his hand found the bags by his feet. He swiftly brushed the wetness off his cheek before following the others out the door.

Why is time going so fast, he thought as he quickened his pace taking the lead. If he kept this pace he should get to the Armory with hopefully two minutes to spare, well perhaps in reality a minute and forty-seven seconds.

They approached the last corner and the last straight away and there was the division waiting for them. Trance noticed the banner with the dark green field and the Golden Lynx. Also Major Marlett was standing by his horse just in front of the Armory and the bulk of the division facing him and standing by their horses. From three other directions came the other young men that had been commissioned to the Golden Lynx from around the base. Before he could get a count of how many of them had been commissioned he noticed that with the division were three fair sized wagons each the size of a bus and pulled by four large robot horses with two regular war horses tethered to the back. As he got closer he noticed that two of the wagons were the same in shape and size and the third was shaped differently and had the blue shepherds crook with a vine flowing up it. The bottom of the vine could be seen as not healthy while the top looked healthy with the representation of lush leaves, the medical emblem.

Trance did not have time to ponder what the wagons were, except he suspected that the one was a medical wagon, maybe a cross between an ambulance and emergency room. Also it seemed like there were quite a few young men like him that got commissioned for the Golden Lynx. At that moment Marlett stepped forward and addressed the gathered division.

“Hup!” Marlett called and the division stepped to attention. “I need the new Golden Griffins to come line up here in front.” Trance followed the group of new Golden Griffins to line up in front of the rest of the division and in front of Marlett. “Men,” he said as he addressed the new Golden Griffins, “I have a couple things for you. First and foremost are your official badges and patches to indicate your weapon and rank. Before I ask the official question and present you your badge and welcome you to this division, and yes even though you have been commissioned you have this last opportunity to change your mind and get reassigned. Nothing will be said if you decide you would rather serve in another division. There are still some Griffins that have not been commissioned yet. In ordinary circumstances we could take our time and I would teach you a few things that you must know before you make this decision. Today, we don’t have that luxury.”

This must be unusual, thought Trance and he stood there at attention and wondered what Marlett may have to say that might cause someone to choose to pass up this division for a different one. He knew that each division had its history and status and they each had some secret they only revealed to its members. Is this what he was about to hear?

Marlett looked them over and continued, “Since we don’t have the normal time, I need to reveal a few things to you now.” He noticed that a couple of the new Golden Griffins had raised their hands. No time for that, “It looks like a few of you have questions. I think I know what you want so let me tell you that we don’t have time because we have been summoned to aid Baroness Hummphrian in Ambria. I know it is about eight hundred miles to Uperian, the capital city.”

“I wonder what is going on,” Trance heard his friend Zak Karry ask quietly.

“Don’t know, but it must be big. You know how well connected she is, and she is very good friends with King Maximus,” replied Bear. Trance smiled thinking about his very large friend in the division. With pleasure he thought of the time he first met Marlett, Zak and Bear and this Golden Griffin division. The six foot eight inch mammoth Golden Griffin must be not far behind him.

“First off,” said Marlett, getting back to what he had to say before administering the official question and giving the new division members their badges. “You have probably heard a lot about this division and that there is a high mortality rate. Now you will know what this division is all about and why we get sent all over the kingdom.” This was always a sticking point but he had to let them know what they should know and expect. True there were massive dangers ahead, but the rewards of serving in the division, he would never pass them up, even to death. “You know that our kingdom is protected and defended by various military services. If you don’t mind just a brief overview.”

Out of the corner of his eye Trance spotted two daggermen that were from Rex’s school team mumble. Come on guys let Marlett speak so we can get going, Trance thought.

“The Sheriffs protect and uphold the law in the towns, cities, and counties as well as investigating all varieties of crime. Then the state and kingdom Marshals who investigate more serious crimes at the state and kingdom level. There is the Nautical Force with its assembly of ships and a few varieties of aerial craft that defend all of the waterways from the oceanic coasts, seas, lakes and rivers. The Aerial Knights patrol and defend the skies above the kingdom. There are also the Space Knights aboard our space fleet. Here we get to what makes our division special.” He paused to catch his thoughts.

Trance was trying to keep a straight face. He had learned all of this some time ago. I wonder where Marlett is heading. He did not have long to wait.

“From their outposts and Rooks the Pawn divisions with their transports defend a radius of one hundred miles. The divisions of Knights patrol and defend a radius of two hundred to two hundred and fifty miles from their Rooks. Most Golden Griffin divisions patrol out to three hundred to four hundred miles from their outposts. This division is different. Most of you have probably wondered at some point why this division seems to forever roam all over the kingdom. You will now know. This division does not have a radius. We are the only Golden Griffin division that has authority to go wherever whenever we are needed. We defend and bring support to any pawn, knight, or other Golden Griffin division. Also we can aid the Nautical, Aerial, and Space fleet. In truth there are only three such divisions on Althora. Along with our division there are the Ice Bears from the kingdom of Dalvor in the north and the Vorians from Atlalla in the far East.”

Trance nodded and saw with a glance that more of the other new Golden Griffins made similar gestures. That would make this division more prestigious. Marlett was signaling for attention again.

“This division is also unique in that we are not as traditionally organized. This is due in course by how you may be promoted and the status of your rank. There is a reason why your commissions did not list your new current ranks,” Marlett said and paused. The expressions of some of their faces told him all he needed to know as the minds behind those faces processed and speculated the implications. “I carefully went over all of your class scores and how well you trained with your weapons and qualification scores. These are only your first badges signifying your rank. Promotions in this division can occur at any time when needed. Your performance in your duties will be monitored as well as how you study back at our home station. I have the authority to promote anyone at any time, is that understood.” He waited a moment as all of the division assembled answered with a resounding “Yes sir!”

Marlett continued, “There is something else you need to know. None of the other divisions, with the exceptions of their captains and higher, are allowed to know that no matter what your rank is in this division, in reality you are automatically three ranks higher than someone in another division with the same rank. A Solitaire in this division is the equivalent to an Order Sergeant in another division. Yes that means there are not very many Golden Griffins that out rank me, and my predecessor who was a Colonel had even fewer,” with this Trance swallowed and he noticed a couple new Griffins perk up. “That is correct, due to the nature of our division and the utter importance of how we serve the kingdom and planet. And there is one more secret,” he paused for effect and knew he had every member of the division's attention. “This secret is for everyone in this division so before I let you know what it is I will come up to each of you and ask you the question.”

Marlett turned to his second in command, Captain Telliar Dorouth. “Bring me the badges.” He took the first badge, checked out the name and approached one of the New Golden Griffins farthest to the left of Trance. “Will you solemnly swear that what you hear today stays with you and only you and all of the members of the division of the Golden Lynx, a royal division of the Golden Griffins of the Kingdom of Cator? And will you also swear that you will perform any and all duties connected to this division in the service and defense of the Kingdom of Cator of the planet Althora for as long as you draw breath and life sustain you. By your honor and fealty before this division and God you swear, till the breaking of the sky.”

Without hesitation the man stated, “I swear.”

Marlett extended his hand and they shook and then immediately he took the badge and handed it to the man. Trance craned his neck slightly and saw the gleam of the white badge of a Solitaire. Marlett moved to the next man and asked the same question with the same response. One at a time he moved along the line as man after man took the oath and accepted his badge. A couple men took a moment to contemplate their answers. However, both made the decision to take the oath and received his badge, one of which was the red badge of a Chevalier. Trance was pleased and surprised that Zam and Gracer were made Chevaliers, while Mandor was given the blue badge of a Corporal. A bigger surprise was that Marlett presented Hamon with a bronze badge of an Order Sergeant, the lowest of the three types of Sergeants. Trance's friend Zak, Gracer’s older brother, was the division’s Weapons Sergeant, and his other friend Bear was the Master Sergeant.

So far not one man had decided to leave the division. One man did come close and seemed to struggle with his decision. The young man looked down and frowned and Trance could almost feel his fear, it was just about tangible. Marlett stood patiently waiting and then the young man looked and replied, “I swear.” Marlett nodded and took his hand and shook. Marlett had seen that reaction before and there were a few times when the prospective Griffin decided not to join and had to be sent back to his barracks. Five men were left including Trance. Marlett went to the man just right of Trance and asked the question. The man took heartbeats to swear the oath and accept a blue Corporal badge.

Trance felt several sensations as Marlett stepped in front of him, fear, excitement, terror, exhilaration, and a sense of accomplishment all flashed through his mind. Trance felt a small tremor through his body as Marlett recited the question. “I swear!” Trance heard his voice say. It took a moment or it may have been longer for Trance to shake Marlett’s hand. Captain Telliar gave Marlett the badge that would be Trance’s first rank in the division. For a moment Trance looked as he accepted it and for the briefest moments wondered if it was real, a mistake, a dream. The badge was bronze and emblazoned with a sword wielding Griffin and where the usual number was the word Warden, on Earth it would be a Warrant Officer. More than that Trance suddenly realized as some of the men had turned to see his badge, this would make him, with Major Marlett in command, fourth in succession of command.

“How, why,” Trance tried to say as Marlett gave him a wink and swiftly moved to the next man.

The last man took the oath and Marlett thanked Telliar and moved to the front of the division. “If you have not done so, put your badge over your heart.”

Trance withdrew his badge and turned it over and saw that it would be held in place by a triangle of magnets. Why did it seem to take so long for him, and maybe some of the others had this issue, to unbutton his shirt enough to reach in with the magnet triangle and attach his badge over his heart.

Marlett took his place and signaled for silence again, “Hup. I want to thank all of you for deciding to move forward and choose to serve in this division. It is challenging, rewarding, you could be killed in our first mission, but I promise that you will never regret serving in this division.” Marlett took a moment to formulate his next statement. He fondly remembered hearing this secret the first time and how shocked he had been. Now was the time they needed to know before they headed out. “Okay, I think it is now time for you to learn the most important secret you may or will ever hear. I want you all to remember that you have given your most solemn and honorable word to keep every secret revealed to you in the service of this division. If anyone breaks this oath and utters this secret you will be more than expelled from this division and the Golden Griffins.”

Trance and all the new division members nearly held their breath. This must be a major secret, Trance thought. What could be so sensitive that they could be expelled or worse? Could their very lives be at risk over this secret?

Marlett took a moment to look everyone in the eye. Satisfied he cleared his throat, “What no one in the kingdom and on the planet knows is that we are the custodians of the Petihariam.”

“It’s a miniature pyramid,” Zak whispered to Trance. “No one knows how old it is, what it’s made of, or where it even came from.”

Despite the whisper to Trance, a few other new Golden Griffins in the division heard. Marlett had heard also and chose to ignore it and move on. “The Petihariam is locked in a vault at the palace where our home base is located. We are the only ones that know of its existence and location and we are the only ones that have access to it. I will hold all of you to your oath; only death will relieve you of your oath and obligation.” Unbidden was a thought that he had the last time he had checked on the Petihariam. He was almost sure that someone else had been in the room before him and he remembered looking around and not finding anything. How could anyone get in, there were only the two keys he knew of, the one he had locked up in his office, and the other locked up in a secure safe. Oh well, he returned his attention to the division and nodded as they voiced their acceptance. “With the formalities out of the way, we need to get to our mission.”

Everyone stood more at attention to hear what their instructions were. Trance felt his nerves as it settled on him that his dream of becoming a knight, well an elite knight, a Golden Griffin was finally here and he was about to head out on his first mission. Could it be his first and last mission? Dear God be with me and help me do my duties and see another day.

“As you can see we will travel with these three special wagons. The two that you see that are the same are the armor carriers and they have lockers for your armor and weapons and four changing rooms. We use these wagons when we have to travel to certain locations. The third wagon you see is a special medical wagon, it is very probable that some of you may get seriously injured during our mission and we don’t have time to get you to a full medical hospital. Now what you really need to know, as I said we have been summoned by Baroness Hummphrian who dearly needs our aid. She has reported that at least two divisions of Boulthorian knights have been raiding all around Amberia. We are ordered to aid in stopping them. Now I am going to give you just five minutes to meet and greet your division members and then you are to take your bags and go find your locker in one of the wagons, there is a list available on the screen by the door, store your bag and then immediately head toward the stable and get your horses and report back here so we may head toward Amberia and Uperian the capital city,” Marlett said and he was the first to step up and again greet and shake hands with the new members of the division.

Trance and the new members of the division were suddenly surrounded and congratulated by the rest of the division. As Zak greeted him a thought struck as he noticed Bear shaking Gracer’s hand, “Is this unusual that two brothers are in the same division?”

“Not really. I think it depends, well to be honest I don’t think it is supposed to happen,” Zak said and then in a lower voice he confided, “Actually in this case I think Marlett went to, uh, it went high,” he raised his hand slightly and continued, “There are other instances of brothers serving together. And I think he is here because of you.” Zak winked and turned to shake Hamon’s hand and greet him.

By greeting Bear swung down and gave Trance a hug, oh this is fitting Trance thought and he tried to suck in another breath. Bear released him and stepped back, “I am so glad you made it. Zak and I have been keeping up with how you did in school and then as we watched you at the end of year tournaments I was sure you would make it through.”

“Thank you Bear. I almost can’t believe it,” Trance said and then he looked at his badge. “I don’t know I deserve this. Is this official?”

Before Bear could respond Marlett came up and said, “Yes you do. From all of your scores and recommendations, I have heard from several of my friends here at the Grindstone. I did want a word with you. I wanted you to know that the armor carrier there on the right was redone. I had an extra compartment built in for your horse’s flight pack and I personally oversaw it loaded aboard. I look forward to seeing your horse for myself. I understand you did quite a job fixing him up. His previous rider was a very dear friend of mine and I’m sure he is looking down with pleasure.”

“I hope so,” Trance replied. They saluted each other and shook hands again. Before Trance could take a step toward the armor carrier seven more men came up to shake his hand. As the last man shook his hand and stepped away to greet Zam, it just dawned on him that Marlett and the rest of the division were wearing casual clothes. Curious, he thought they would don their armor to ride out. He did notice that even though they were dressed casually they all wore their daggers. His hand immediately dropped and he felt where his dagger should be. Trance set his bag down and opened it and in a moment he had the familiar bowie knife with the eagle headed hilt. As he fastened his belt and felt the knife's weight against his thigh he thought fondly of his grandfather who had so long ago bought it for him.

“That’s an interesting dagger,” said Captain Telliar as he stepped up.

“Thank you,” Trance said. “My grandfather had a dream a long time ago, well it was probably forever ago, and he had the impression to buy me the first eagle he saw and when he woke he spotted an advertisement for this knife so he bought it.”

“It must be very special to you. Well, I will let you get going,” Telliar said and finished giving his greetings to the others.

Trance picked up his bag and swiftly headed over to the armor carrier and found the list by the door. Towards the top of the list was his name. He opened the door and was slightly surprised. The wagon was set up slightly like a large bus with an aisle down the center and lockers on both sides. Just inside the door and to the right was the added chamber that was labeled for Odin’s flight pack. Further on were the two dressing rooms and a little farther in he found his locker. By the handle was a small dark plate, just then Trance looked behind him and saw Gracer at his locker and placed his index finger on the plate, a green light showed for a moment and Gracer opened his locker. Trance reached down and placed his index finger on the plate and he was delighted at the green light and he opened the locker for the first time.

Inside the locker Trance found his armor. It was arranged neatly and in an arrangement that made it easy for him, and he assumed it was like this in everyone’s lockers, to grab and take to one of the changing rooms where he would don his armor. On the back wall of the locker was his sword belt with his sword in its scabbard and next to it was his ax and bow. He was curious when he spotted two quivers filled with arrows. Trance turned to Gracer who had already placed his bag in his locker and was closing the door. Next to him was Hamom shutting his locker. Down the aisle he saw a few other new Golden Griffins at lockers, about half of them were in the wagon.

“Hey, I seem to have two quivers, I am not a regular archer,” Trance said, trying to figure out how to phrase the question without sounding weird, at least to him.

“You have two quivers because one is a normal quiver holding twenty arrows. The other is a war quiver with forty arrows,” Hamon answered. “You should also have a regular spear in there also.”

Trance looked back and nodded to himself as he noticed the difference in the quivers. Then he looked and spotted the spear held up by his other weapons. I guess this makes sense he thought as he stored his bag and stepped back and closed the door. A slight red light at the fingerplate let him know the locker was again locked. Trance looked around a moment and then followed the others out.

Outside the wagon the new members of the Golden Lynx division headed off to the stables to get their horses. Ahead of the group and off by themselves the two daggermen that Trance recognized from The White Knights school team had their heads together and were busy talking. “I wonder what they are talking about,” Trance wondered aloud.

“Probably excited about their positions. I think that one is Kammery and the other is Danien. You know I don’t think they ever lasted very long ever in the battles back at school. You know I can’t think that I ever really saw them hanging around Rex,” said Zam.

They turned the last corner and the stables were just up the lane from them. Trance saw that there was a line at the stables. A few new Golden Griffins were already on their horses and heading off in other directions. Every few moments another horse was brought out and one of the stable hands used a comp pad to check the horse out to his rider.

“Hey look who is coming our way, it’s Kammery and Danien,” said a familiar unfriendly voice. All of the new members of the Golden Lynx stopped and looked at Rex on his shimmering royal blue Percor Destrier. “I am shocked that you two should get commissioned and with the Golden Kittens,” Rex said and laughed.

“I see some idiot made a mistake and made you a Second Lewey,” replied Danien, catching Trance by surprise. He had always thought Rex controlled all of his teammates, maybe that wasn’t entirely accurate. Maybe there were some like Kammery and Danien that did not like Rex. Then suddenly Trance’s brain got onto what Danien had said and he swung his eyes up and he took in Rex’s badge which was gold and resembled his with a sword wielding Griffin and underneath ‘2nd LT.’

“Ah yes, I had very high scores and our Captain recognized my leadership qualities,” Rex said haughtily. “You should be proud Danien, they made you a Chevalier. Don’t fret Kammery, it should not take you long to get promoted from Solitaire to Chevalier.” It was as Rex nodded and shared a quick laugh with his companion riding next to him that Trance was struck not by whom he saw, but the unique horse he was riding.

Equally as tall as Rex’s Percor Destrier V, however, by comparison Rex’s horse seemed to show off how menacing and regal it was, the other young man's horse was not shiny but flat deathly black with cobalt blue eyes. Its shape was slightly more menacing and different from most of the Muster type horses he was used to seeing. “What kind horse is that,” Trance asked quietly.

“I have heard of them. That is a Phraysian Courser,” said Hamon. “That must be one of their newest models. I have seen a couple others on base and spotted three of them when we were at the Forge. It is armed with hyper fiber bows that are the equal of the bows on Cousor, Rex’s horse.”

Rex had continued on, “Maybe you two can improve your skills to make it to your second mission. Oh that might be too much.”

“We have skills,” Kammery said, feeling his face flush. “You chose not to use them. You always wanted Jerethone near you to shoot anyone coming close to you and holding back your precious swordsmen and axmen. We didn’t ever get much of a chance as you always sent us out first.”

“That is because you are useless on the battlefield. I want serious knights or now Golden Griffins with me. Those with true fighting skills,” Rex scoffed.

“You know very well I have those skills. Just because I choose to use my daggers and short sword has nothing to do with my skill in the field. You should know, back when we competed for the captaincy, I practically beat you with my short sword,” Danien chimed in.

“Oh ho. Then explain why you didn’t become captain and you never got close to competing with me in any sword challenges,” Rex said.

“That’s easy,” Danien boldly stated and took a step closer to his former team captain. “It was your dad for one, and you cheated remember. You can claim whatever, but that is what happened. And you always went to the officials and made sure I was never close to competing with you at any swordsmen competitions. Also I happen to know that you desperately tried to avoid competing with Trance. I actually took him on a number of times and I can say that he is the better swordsman. He never tried to avoid me and he was chivalrous in victory,” Danien looked back and nodded his respect to Trance before boldly stalking past Rex and Jerethone to the line to get his horse.

Rex’s face flushed, stung by one of his former teammates gall. A motion from Jerethone prevented him from verbally or physically retaliating. He turned forward to ride on and spotted the other new members of the Golden Lynx division as they all started to move toward the line at the stable. Well he might gain a little dignity back there in front were two of his least favorite competitors. His eyes raked over them and his smile broadened. “Ah, congratulations are maybe in order. Hamon you’ll make a, uh, good Order Sergeant. Oh, how disappointed you must be Trance. I bet you were expecting to be immediately brought in as a Captain. A Warden, commendable, but not what you are used to,” Rex said.

Hamon was about to speak and stopped as Trance took a step forward, “I would rather be a Solitaire in this division than any rank in a division with you. I suggest you get going, I don’t think it would look good for a new 2nd Lew to be late.” With an effort he kept his face still and looked away and did his best to walk forward and not let his knees quake, not from fear, but in pure anger.

Hamon kept his mouth shut and ignored Rex as he laughed and made some rude coarse remarks before riding forth with Jerethone beside him. “You know I think Marlett was right in a way. I think it is probably best, especially for Rex and that division, that they do not know exactly about our division.”

“What do you mean,” Trance said, feeling slightly let down. Why could Rex get a rank he deserved?

“You know, that part of our rank would actually be three levels higher in a normal division,” Hamon said, trying to cheer his friend up. Trance didn’t seem to get what he was saying so he continued. “If that is the case than in his division you would be Captain and two levels higher than him.”

It took Trance a few seconds to process this statement. Slowly it seemed before he understood and just as slowly for his lips to lift in a genuine smile. One corner switched up, “Yeah, I don’t think he needs to know that. Let him go, I think I need a change of scenery. We have a mission to head out on.”

They joined the line at the stable and gradually moved up. Eventually all of them got their horses. Trance mounted Odin and waited with the others to get their horses, they had decided to wait and all ride back together as a division, well the new members together at least. Hamon mounted his horse Bront, a Muster Type 24 F, a model that was a slightly more armored cavalry horse. Hamon walked Bront over by Trance on Odin and noted the horse’s head turn to the receding Rex on Cousor.

“What is it, Bront,” Hamon asked his horse. He looked down at the monitor screen on the back of the horse's neck and read, “I am glad that horse is going. I don’t like him and he doesn’t like, no it is more than that, I think he hates Odin, and me if that is possible. Odin and I had some good talks. Cousor and Stalker seemed to keep together and always seemed to look down on us. I think Stalker knows something bad, not sure what.” Hamon sat up straighter and looked at Trance curious and then asked Bront, “Who is Stalker?”

“Stalker is the Phraysian Courser twenty that belongs to Jerethone the archer,” Odin replied as the same message came up on Bront’s screen. Hamon was still surprised as he heard the voice of a young anxious knight. As Trance had been upgrading Odin he had stumbled upon an old robot knight and took out the voice box and installed it in Odin.

Hamon looked briefly surprised at the voice from Odin. He had heard it before, at least he was more used to it now. Then one thought crossed his mind. He knew and competed against Rex for years in inter school competitions and against Jerethone. “I wonder where Jerethone got the money for his horse. Phraysians are expensive.”

Trance on the other hand had a different thought. “That’s right, Jerethone is an excellent archer. Didn’t he nearly win all of the archery contests last year and at the end of year tournaments as well as getting the highest archery scores at the Forge?”

“He sure did,” said Mandor as he rode up to his friends.

Trance tilted his head and thought back and tried to remember. He wasn’t sure he had ever paid attention to Jerethone or what kind of bow he shot. It was a longbow he was sure. Then another memory surfaced, “What kind of bow does he shoot?”

Mandor and Hamon both frowned and looked at each other. However, it was Zam that answered, “He shoots a Thunderhead longbow.”

Somehow Trance was not really surprised. For a moment he let his thoughts drift back to last summer. The theatre with Corena also popped up in his mind, as well as the arrow he found stuck in the tree after the mock battle between his squad and Rex’s squad. Three arrows and a bolt surfaced. Then he had a staggering thought. There had been another arrow. One he rarely thought of. That was the arrow at the tournaments that eliminated him from the archery joust. He remembered looking and thinking that it had come from near Rex and the White Knights. But the other three, how and why? The arrow at the tournament was to make him loose and look bad, yet the others were intended to kill. The same questions rose again.

“Hey, are you okay? We are all here and ready to go,” Hamon said, concerned at the look on Trance’s face.

Trance had a momentary shudder and looked and saw the division members all mounted and ready to ride back to Marlett and the division. “I’m fine. Just a couple questions I have, but they can wait. You’re right we need to get back.” Turning forward in his saddle he took the control stick controls, reigns, and not sure if he would find answers to his questions he rode forward not knowing he was taking the lead. Marlett, the Baroness, and maybe some of his fate and destiny were waiting.

Chapter 24

The Road to Uperian

The newly commissioned members of the Golden Lynx were only slightly surprised to find Marlett and the rest of the division mounted on their robot horses. Marlett raised his hand and motioned for them to assemble. Trance and the others walked their horses up and found places and turned to face Marlett who had now taken a place ready to lead the division out of the GrindStone, the Golden Griffin training base.

“I have one last thing to let you know. Perhaps some of you might have noticed we have four more men than normal. You all know that nearly every Pawn, Knight, and Golden Griffin division has seventy men, ten men per primary weapon,” Marlett said in explanation. Everyone knew there were seven primary types of weapons, swords, ax, mace, dagger, spear, bow, and the category of specialty weapons such as Hamon’s hammer. “That is what you might say is the norm; however, as you have already learned we are different. The four extra members of our division are Medical officers, Master Medic Andler, Master Medic Petrick, Medi Tech Connel, and Medi Tech Romanth. If and when you are in need, they will take care of you. I suggest that when you have a free moment you may want to get to know them, chances are sooner or later you will need their assistance,” Marlett said half in jest while introducing the medical team as they sat ready on the medical wagon.

“I want you all to ride comfortably, we have a long way to ride today. Tomorrow, all of you will don your armor for the next couple days' ride. Lets move out, hup,” Marlett said, wheeling his horse around and leading the way to the base's gates and down the road.

The division formed up two by two and was followed by the three wagons. One of the two armor carriers went first followed by the medical wagon and the second armor carrier. Trance rode in the fourth pair beside Mandor and behind Captain Telliar and first Lieutenant Wyn, then Bear and Zak, and Hamon and Gracer. Zam was paired with an archer further back in line.

Marlett, Trance observed, set a steady pace following the base's speed limit. In minutes they approached the gate and the road beyond. At the gate Marlett stopped a moment to confer with one of the guards and then seeing the road clear he gave a signal to the division to follow him and he headed out gradually increasing his horses speed up to a trot till the last pair was on the road and then the three wagons, the two armor carriers and medical wagon. With everyone now on the road Marlett sped up further getting his robot horse to a full gallop immediately followed by the horseback riding division and the wagons.

Here we go, Trance thought as he relaxed in his saddle as Odin carried him down the road. He breathed deeply and gave a quick look around as the base and the surrounding city went by. As excited as he had been to head out on his first official mission he couldn’t help feeling slightly down. He had learned so much there and it had been his home for the last eight months. During his time there he had made regular calls home to check in with his family once a week as well as once a month he got on the kytherum and called the Markems.

On his calls home his mother did her best not to cry, well with the kytherum’s screen, he still saw a few tears slide down her cheeks as she smiled and talked to him about her days and how his dad was doing at the observatory. Occasionally his dad and either Sammy or even Heather would step up and talk to him.

He did not forget his adopted brother Kyle; he called him every chance he could. Kyle could talk to him about everything he was going through in his training. Trance remembered that Kyle had been training to be Knight when Trance met him and was given a special leave for the occasion.

His dad was enjoying working and documenting and learning about all the stars and planets he was observing. Sammy excitedly talked about figuring out the peddlewheelers, not much different from a bicycle from Earth. He had also started learning about the inner workings of the robot horses. Heather usually didn’t talk much, but she had started taking a fashion design class.

Trance remembered a toy Heather had long ago that had different plastic plates that you rearranged, some had ladies with different hair styles, some various blouses, different skirts, lastly legs and shoes. You arranged them in a frame and then you laid a piece of paper on it and traced over the plates and saw your design. Then you could color them. Over time, he thought, Heather had probably tried every combination before taking the ideas and making her own designs and drawings.

Then the bittersweet memory of his call home, three days ago, invaded his mind. He recalled talking to his mother and being nervous as he brought up going over to Corena’s. At the time he had no idea that he would be staying the night. “Well you are an adult now. I hope you two have a good time,” Eileen had said with a mothers knowing look. He knew that his mother trusted Corena and she trusted him. She always did her best to not judge and tried her best to listen. Eileen had always told her kids that they could come and talk to her about anything, even relationships and sex. Though she had her traditional views that they should wait till marriage, she knew how powerful feelings and desires were, she was understanding and wanted them to know they could always talk to her.

“I’m sure we’ll have a good time. Corena wants me to watch the new episode of ‘Doctor Renain,” Trance said. Then his face clouded slightly as he had worried about being commissioned.

“What is it Trance,” she asked, catching his look and her mother’s concern came out.

“I’m just a little nervous about getting my commission. I know what division I want to be commissioned to, well, I don’t know if Marlett will commission me and then there is what our first mission will be,” he replied.

“Just pray and believe. You did your best and you told me how you scored in your lessons. If it is meant to be you’ll get commissioned to serve with Marlett, Zak, and Bear,” she said, doing her best to reassure him. Then she did her best to keep a hold of her own emotions. “I love you, and as I have always told you, God loaned you to me and I am blessed to be your mom, nothing will ever change that,” she took a moment to collect her thoughts and unsuccessfully stopped a tear from escaping her eye. “If something terrible should happen to you and God calls you home I will grieve and miss you. With faith we will see each other again,” another tear spilled out and she continued her struggle to hold on, “You will make a fine Golden Griffin, and I know you’ll make us proud. One more thing, no matter what happens I know one thing for sure, you will always do the right thing.”

“Thank you mom,” he had told her. Then as she wiped at her eyes they talked about happier topics. Now he felt again that slight tremble as he realized that his service to the kingdom was here. He wondered if he would be able to call her tonight just to check in and let her know he was okay. He was not sure; maybe it would be safer to call later.

He forced his mind to the present. A quick look around showed him that while he had been thinking Odin had carried him some miles and had carefully kept him even with Mandor and keeping pace with Marlett up ahead.

“Are you okay,” Mandor asked.

“Yeah,” Trance replied as he realized his friend noticed his look.

“All right, you just didn't look like yourself for a few minutes,” Mandor said concerned.

Trance put on a smile and said, “I appreciate your concern. I was just thinking about my last call home and talking to mom. There’s nothing to worry about, except maybe our first mission.”

“I don’t think you really need to worry about our mission, you know you’re the best swordsman. And you’re a really good leader. It won’t take long for you to get promoted and in charge of a division,” Mandor said.

Trance smiled, “Thanks. Maybe you’ll get a chance to lead someday. You're just as good as I am.”

“Nah,” Mandor replied, “I could never lead like you. If I had my way, I will follow you wherever you serve.”

Trance did not know how to reply. He smiled bashfully. “Let’s get this mission done first.”

The division rode on. Trance was starting to wonder how long they would ride before stopping for a break or to eat. It was a pleasant day and the roads were clear of snow, being this was the last Ettenday of the month Adien, the third month of winter. There was still a good amount of snow on the ground covering lawns.

Marlett kept the division moving at maximum road speeds upwards of sixty-five to seventy miles an hour. Just as Trance and some of the other Golden Griffins were starting to show signs that they needed to stop, Marlett looked ahead and directed the division to head for a large restaurant up the road a few blocks.

The parking area in front of the restaurant was divided in three with places to ‘tether’ your horse along the front sidewalk, like Trance remembered from the old west America on Earth, for single riders to either just park their horse or the could even take the horses charging cord and plug him in to recharge his power packs if they needed it.

As he rode into the lot Trance noticed that along with being able to ‘tether’ your horse along the sidewalk the first third of the lot was for single rider horses with a charging post to plug into. The remainder of the lot was for chariots, carts, and wagons of various sizes with charging posts that could accommodate up to six or even eight horses in the largest parking places. Trance followed Marlett and found a post along the sidewalk near the end to park Odin. He saw that Odin was still fully charged so he didn’t need to plug him in. He took a look around and saw that Marlett and about eleven others were able to tether at the sidewalk and most of the others found single posts to stop at. There were two groups that actually rode up and occupied a spot for a wagon. Of course the armor carriers and the medical wagon went to three of the larger tethering locations.

Marlett took the lead and entered the restaurant with the rest of the division following. He went to a large table and signaled Trance to follow. Trance nodded and walked up and took a seat at the large round table with Marlett, Telliar, Wyn, Zak, Bear, Corporal Vell, and Hamon. Trance felt slightly nervous, it seemed that the leaders of the division were at the table. It took him a moment and a glance at his badge that, oh, he guessed that he was now one of the leaders. As he began to process that thought he took notice of the rest of the division finding tables to sit at. Nobody sat alone, it seemed that the older members of the division made it a point to make sure the newer members had a place to sit.

“Oh my, Major, where are you and your boys heading off to now,” asked the middle aged waitress as she stepped up to the table.

“Just for a ride,” Marlett said with a wink. He enjoyed the banter with Narion, the waitress. She absolutely knew he could not give her that confidential information; it could easily endanger the division. It was just the fun of asking and seeing how he would answer. “The guys need a good meal before we really get going,” Marlett added.

“Very well, what can I get you,” Narion asked, ready to take their orders with her small comp pad.

One by one they ordered their meals from fried fowl, to kinds of steaks, some forms of pasta, and fish. Trance looked at the menu and decided on an afflor steak with a salad and veggie mix. He thought it was a good choice and the price was decent for the steak. At fifteen currents and seventy-five centas he could afford it. Four days ago he had taken the opportunity and withdrew one hundred and fifty currents from his bank account. Before Narion turned away Trance saw something he had not expected on the menu. Could this be right, it was a drink that was much like an Italian soda, one of his favorites. “I would like to try one of those blaudar berry carbonated,” he asked for the soda flavored with the berry that looked so much like a huckleberry.

As Narion and the other waitresses took orders and walked back to their stations to get drinks Marlett stood up and addressed the division. “Hup, I need your attention for a moment,” he looked at his chron and continued, “I hope everyone enjoys your meal. I think we have a few minutes to enjoy ourselves. However, we do have duties we need to attend to, so you have forty minutes to relax and then we need to be on our horses. Thank you.” Marlett sat down and took a drink of his green carbonated soda.

Trance’s drink was delivered and he took a sip. Oh my, he thought, one of the best drinks. He sipped more and listened to the conversations around the table. Trance learned more about the structure of the division. He paid attention as Marlett talked about the plans for the next couple days and some strategy as he delegated to the division leaders.

“So we will ride as far as we can today. Then we will stay at the nearest base or hotel on our way, in the morning I want everyone in armor and ready to ride most of the day tomorrow. We’ll stop again and try to make it to Uperian. When we get there I’ll try to get us in to see the Baroness Hummphrian and learn what the Boulthorians are up to in her state.”

“That sounds good,” Telliar said. “They have been a lot more active this last year. I keep wondering what they are up to. I can’t ever remember them invading like this before, if they keep this up it might actually lead to war. We haven’t fought a war for what ninety years, and that was just a revolt really on the Tormun continent and involving three of their kingdoms.”

“That was the Durth revolt. I think the last planetary war was two centuries ago, and the history books are filled with how vile that was. As I believe the prophecies, the next war could be extremely devastating,” said Bear.

“That’s right, however, I think that we’ll at least have the Griffin General leading us at that time, and we don’t even know when he’ll show up,” Zak said.

“True,” Marlett said. He had heard this many times. He believed in the prophecies. Sometimes he prayed that the Griffin General would show up soon and other times he wished it would be centuries for him to come. Even though peace would follow, before that would be terrible. “I will give you more orders later,” he said as their meals arrived at the table. Before any of them started in, Marlett directed them to take a moment to say grace.

Trance sipped more of his drink and then started to eat. What a wonderful meal. As he sat pleasantly eating he thought about how long he’d been on Althora. As he went back over events and about when they happened he stumbled on a thought. When he first met Gracer on his first day of school in band Gracer had said that Kyle and Zak had graduated together, how could that be. Kyle had been in basic knight training when Trance met him that day that Marlett and his division had found him at and taken him to his family in Shandac and Zak was a Golden Griffin. “Hey Zak, I have a question for you. When I met Gracer for the first time, he said that you and Kyle graduated together. How did that happen?”

Zak smiled shyly and nodded his head and he finished chewing the piece of fried heniver. He swallowed and replied, “I do remember Gracer telling me about that and I guess we never really talked about that. Well I knew Kyle through school. I am actually a year ahead of him. When I was about to graduate we had a family emergency, my great granddad passed away so I missed my normal graduation. His burial was more important at the time. I did get my diploma and was able to go to training to become a Golden Griffin, however since my family still wanted me to ‘officially graduate’ they talked to the school and I was included when Kyle graduated and got to walk forward, I was given a nice certificate that they made up and my mom got a chance to give me my surcoat and dagger even though I had been using them for a year.”

“That would explain it,” Trance said. He took another bite of steak and tilted his head back enjoying the flavor. His eye fell on his chron and he decided he better just finish eating. With his plate clear he finished drinking and excused himself from the table and headed to the restroom. Just as he got back to his seat Narion was handing out their bills, his total was twenty currents and thirty-four centas. His hand went for his money pouch and he counted out two brass domino bars each worth ten currents and then the coins for the centas. Narion came by and collected his payment and he got up and headed for the door and went down to Odin.

Gradually at first and then more and more division members exited the restaurant. Marlett was one of the last to come out and head to his horse. In moments the division was mounted and heading back on the road. They rode steady for three hours before stopping for a rest stop for fifteen minutes before riding for another three and a half hours. They took the time to ride through a ride through sandwich place before riding another hour before stopping at a hotel and stayed the night. To Trance's surprise his friends flipped coins to see who would share a room with him, Hamon won. Also when Trance was at the desk he found out that his room was going to be paid for by the Kingdom, Marlett used a transaction card to pay for all of their rooms. The money came from an account specially set up for purposes like this. Trance and Hamon talked for a while when they got to their room and then went to sleep in separate beds.

Trance woke first that morning and showered and was finishing getting dressed when Hamon stirred. “What…what time is it,” Hamon asked.

“It’s early, I haven’t even heard the rooster crow yet,” Trance said. He was actually surprised Marlett had not come by knocking on doors.

Hamon yawned and frowned slightly trying to figure out his friend's humor, “The what doing what.”

“You know, the rooster, uh, the male heniver. They’re like chickens so I assumed that the male crows at dawn,” Trance replied. Checking his chron, “It’s five forty.”

“Oh yeah, your Earth humor. I get it, and you’re right. The male heniver does crow at dawn, and they are called hoyles.”

Trance clicked his fingers and said, “Yes you are right. So the hoyle has not crowed yet. You might want to hurry. I haven’t heard…'' Just then a faint knocking was heard from down the hall. Hamon jumped up and rushed past Trance into the bathroom shutting the door and a moment later the shower kicked on.

“Wow it’s cold to start,” hollered Hamon.

Trance opened the door to the room and spotted Marlett two doors down. “Good morning major. How long do we have?”

Marlett looked surprised then pleased when he saw Trance. “It’s good to see someone is up and ready,” he looked back down the hall at the rooms he had already talked to. Taking a guess, Marlett smiled and said, “Tell Hamon that he has five, no, ten minutes to be out and dressed and on his horse or he has to run the first two miles.”

“Got it,” Trance said and chuckling went back in the room and knocked on the bathroom door.

“What.”

“You have ten minutes to be out, dressed, and on your horse or you have to run the first, uh five miles,” Trance said and chuckled more. The threat was two miles but maybe if Hamon thought it was five he might speed up.

“Did you say ten minutes and run five miles,” Hamon called back.

“Yep, if I were you I’d hurry,” Trance called back and sat down.

Seven minutes later Trance and a barely showered and dressed Hamon exited the hotel and headed to mount their horses when Marlett waved to them by one of the armor carriers. A glance showed Trance that he and Hamon were the first ones down. Trance looked curious at Hamon then at Marlett who broke down laughing. “I’m impressed. Okay you guys are here go get in your armor the others will be here in, hey I told everybody else they had twenty minutes to be here and in armor.” Hamon shook his head and went to the armor carrier and went in to change.

Trance was on his way to follow when Marlett held him up. “Trust me, I did this for you. It’ll look good for you that you were down first.” Trance nodded his accent. Why would Marlett want him down first? Ah well, he entered the armor carrier, went to his locker and in a couple minutes he was putting it on in one of the dressing rooms. Almost a full minute passed after he stepped out of the armor carrier in his full armor before the others came streaming out of the hotel.

“Let’s go men, in your armor we have miles to go,” Marlett raised his voice slightly and waved his gloved hand at them. Hamon and Trance looked at each other, raised their shoulders and went straight to their horses.

Odin was fully charged and Trance unplugged him from the charging post. “How are you Odin, are you ready for another day of riding,” Trance asked as he mounted the horse.

“I’m fine,” Odin said in his electronic young soldiers voice. “It should be a good day to ride, the weather is supposed to have lots of sunshine till about seven o’clock this afternoon. It’s supposed to cloud up and snow at seven fifteen in the evening.”

“Huh, that’s good to know,” Trance said from the saddle and looked up. He had the visor of his helmet up. “We’ll have to enjoy the sun while we have it.” The sun was on its way up over the horizon. He was glad that when he was refurbishing and improving Odin that he had found the old robot knight and taken its voice box and installed it in Odin. It still caught some of his friends by surprise any time the horse spoke, curious why they had never thought to do this. It made communication much easier, plus he had a great brain wave to connect the horse to the weather network.

With everyone in armor, Marlett again took the lead and they rode for two and a half hours before a rest break and to get breakfast through a ride through restaurant and on the road again. They passed through a variety of towns from small villages to some moderately sized towns to one metropolis just slightly smaller than Caldora.

Four hours later they stopped for a quick lunch and continued on. Marlett pushed them on till it started to snow. They rode on just a short way and stopped for dinner then headed up the road another mile to a hotel to stay the night. They walked through the snow and took turns in the armor carriers to take their armor off and dress in their casual clothes. Then they walked the short distance in a steady snowfall to enter the hotel and find their room. This time it was Mandor that shared a room with Trance.

“We had made really good time. We should be there by mid morning,” Marlett said as he paid for their rooms.

The following morning Trance was again awake early. Again he showered, this time he found Mandor awake. As Trance dressed Mandor showered. Minutes later they passed Marlett in the hall knocking on doors. They headed for the armor carriers and changed. At his locker Trance found a note that he was to grab the war quiver today. Curious I wonder…Trance did as he was asked and exited the armor carrier and headed for Odin.

“Are you ready for today. Marlett said we should be at Uperian today about midmorning,” Trance told the horse as he mounted.

“That would be correct. At normal traffic speeds we should be at the Baroness’s residence in two hours and forty-three minutes. That is unless we stop for a few minutes and then it will be later,” Odin said in reply.

Trance hadn’t thought too much of it at the time but as they rode on it seemed that they had been riding past more farms and fields for the better part of yesterday and even more fields now. When he had studied geography he learned that there were a few states in the kingdom that had a lot of manufacturing for the kingdom, and there were also several states that were more agricultural. These agricultural states amply supplied the kingdom and a good portion of the planet with food. Not only food for the citizens of Althora, but also all of the pets, zoo animals, and a variety of cattle and fowl, which were also raised for food.

Then two sights ahead caught his attention. First there was the city just a few miles ahead. A glance at his chron and he knew this had to be Uperian, sure enough he just saw the city sign. “You were right Odin. We are right on the time you said, it has been right at two hours and forty minutes and we are roughly three miles away,” Trance said and then he saw something else that alarmed him. “What in the name of Heaven. Oh my goodness!” In the distance was a vast black cloud of smoke. In that moment he had a very strong impression of what may lay ahead this day and maybe the following day.

Chapter 25

Serving the Baroness

“We need to get to the capital now!” Marlett yelled and accelerated his horse. The division was already at the posted speed limit. “I’ll take the heat, let's go!” he commanded and pushed on faster passing a few horses, carriages, and wagons, the regular local traffic.

Odin had no problem keeping up as Trance pushed him forward. They raced around traffic easily keeping up with Marlett. People in traffic ahead started pulling over to let the division pass. Zak and Bear who were just ahead of him were focused on the back of Marlett and urged their horses on. In less than two minutes they were in the city and soon turning first one corner then another before taking another straight road for three miles. Marlett turned to the right and in a moment Zak and Bear zipped around the corner immediately followed by Hamon, Trance, and the rest of the division. The two armor carriers and the medical wagon drifted back slightly to make the corners but soon caught up.

In his peripheral vision Trance saw the buildings fly by as he did his best to concentrate on Marlett in the lead. Marlett made one more turn to the right and there straight ahead was the capital building of Amberia. On a smaller scale the building was similar in style to the palace in Caldora. It had an outer wall that surrounded the capitals grounds and the main castle-like building with a fairly tall central tower and four surrounding guard towers. The outer wall had sixteen guard stations evenly spread out along all four walls and a guard station beside the front gate. As they swiftly approached and slowed Trance noticed the pawn at the gate call to the guard station and immediately three more pawns came out, two of the pawns were armed with pikes and the other two took up bows.

Marlett slowed his approach and raised his hand to them. The first pawn approached slightly with the pike, a rather intimidating long spear, and as Marlett came to a stop the pawn recognized him and raised his pike to a standing position. “Major, you gave us a start.” He signaled his fellow pawns and they lowered their weapons. The two archers shrugged and replaced the arrows in their quivers and returned to the station building where they had been playing a board game. The other pike man pawn went and stood by the gate.

Marlett withdrew a comp pad from a small compartment behind his saddle. He tapped the screen and held it down for the armored foot soldier to read. “Our division has been summoned by the Baroness. I think we need to see her right away,” Marlett said with a glance in the direction of the dark cloud of smoke.

The pawn understood immediately, “I see. Open the gate and alert the inner guard,” he said to his fellow pike man. Turning back to Marlett he said, “My apologies Major. We have been on alert and stretched thin since the Boulthorians descended in our state. I will also send word to our captain that you are here, he will want to speak to you.”

“Where is your captain,” Marlett asked surprised.

The pawn pointed his pike toward the smoke cloud. “He is there chasing those vile hyena’s that caused that devastation,” he said with increased volume and anger. He stepped back and saluted Marlett and turned and went to open the gate for the division.

Marlett led the way and the division road through the gate. They only rode a short way before he turned and headed for the stables. Similar to the restaurant's parking area, the stables had a large area dotted with hitching charging posts. Surprising that there were just a few robot horses tethered to posts. Marlett dismounted near one of the far posts and the rest of the division rode up and started dismounting. “Leave your bows and spears with your horses and follow me,” Marlett said and strode across the stables toward the building.

The inner guard was ready and stepped out to greet Marlett. In moments they used their comp pads to document the members of the division and opened the main doors to the capitol building. Marlett swiftly strode through the doors and headed down a long hallway then turned a corner and made his way down a second hallway to a set of double doors. Two guards were standing on duty and saluted Marlett as he got to them.

“Major Marlett, the Baroness is expecting you,” the first guard said and saluted and stepped aside to let Marlett open the door.

Trance was the fourth through the door and was struck by the rather large assembly room. The room had a central aisle between rows upon rows of chairs. On the far end of the room was a raised dais that was occupied currently by four men and a slim elderly lady. Even as he approached behind Marlett, Trance got a sense that this lady was in control. He could tell by the deference the men were showing her as they were in conference.

With a motion of his hand Marlett directed the division to line up behind him as he stepped up about seven feet away from the Baroness and her counselors. The guard from the door had made his way in the room and had trailed Marlett to the front of the room and took his place to the left of Marlett and spoke, “Baroness Hummphrian I present to you Major…”

“Marlett, how great it is to see you. Come give me a hug,” the Baroness said in a voice that was slightly raspy and definitely country, yet had a tone that carried weight and authority. Marlett obeyed without question and went up and gave the dignified older lady a hug. He walked back to his spot as the Baroness who had stood up for his hug sat down and appraised the Golden Griffin division. Despite her apparent age, she had a dignity and commanding presence.

“Anora, it’s a pleasure to see you again. How is your husband the Bar…” Marlett started to ask politely.

“My husband, Robere, is out inspecting the damage those Boulthorians did this time,” the Baroness said. “This has been horrible, if they keep this up they will seriously damage our economy.”

“I don’t think they can do that much damage,” Marlett said, confused at her comment. “Certainly they are just being their usual nuisance by targeting farms in the area.”

Trance knew immediately that Marlett had said the wrong thing and he knew it just as he said it. The expression on the Baroness’s face and the faces of her counselors were very clear.

“Marlett, shame on you,” she said, trying to keep her patience. “Our states main economy is agriculture. While most states have farming communities that raise all sorts of crops, cattle, and fowls, they also have industrial and manufacturing areas that add to their economy. You know just north of us in Musterville the capital of Gallen manufactures most of the robot horses. What we have going for us is that we are centralized in the kingdom where we can sell and send our crops and cattle to nearly every state in the kingdom as well as some of our crops are sent to the other kingdoms around the planet,” Baroness Anora Hummphrian said proudly.

“You know that there are areas where you could have an industrial plant get set up to assist your economy,” Marlett said politely. He had always been surprised that the Baroness had turned down numerous attempts by industrial manufacturers to buy a plot of land in Amberia.

“That is true, however, we have some of the best farmland in the kingdom and we are the stewards of the land. We follow the Holy Book and have a fantastic system that our farmers use to rotate their fields and can have acres rest every seven years. And it’s not just our economy and way of life them scoundrels are threatening. While this state is not much of a strategic military location, should the Boulthorians set up an outpost here they could divide the kingdom and cut off certain critical food supplies to almost every other state in the kingdom,” the Baroness added.

Trance was struck by that and noticed that it had an impact on Marlett also. That would be bad if the Boulthorians set up an outpost here in this state. At the Forge he had learned that there were at least three outposts on Althora, two of them in the kingdom of Cator and one in Atlalla in the Far East. The main outpost, or embassy, was located in the foothills one hundred and fifty miles to the north west of Caldora.

“That would be a significant issue if they should set up an outpost here. What makes you think that is their plan,” Marlett asked.

“I have two reasons for that. First they have been very active in the state lately and I have started seeing a pattern they are taking, and second part of their tactics seem to be acquiring supplies to put together an outpost,” the Baroness said. “You know if I didn’t know better I’d say that there is something funny about them coming in. Normally they can’t fly in and land a troop transport, but it’s been reported to me that there have been at least seven landings this last year in different locations around the state. Doesn’t that seem strange to you Marlett,” she said.

Marlett took a moment to think about it. Surely the space fleet was in place protecting the planet. By a tenuous treaty the Boulthorians were allowed a certain amount of landing craft to land and take off from their main castle outpost. Of course there were a few other such outposts where diplomats from other kingdoms and planets resided. These diplomats met with the kings and their representatives and worked on various issues including trade and security. However, this increase in Boulthorian raids was getting the attention of the king's war counsel. How were they landing more and more knights in the kingdom? Was there a hole in the protection net of the space fleet above the planet?

The Baroness detected and guessed what he was thinking, “I think I know what you are thinking. I have thought the same thing and I have brought it up with King Maximus. I don’t know how or who, but I think there is someone who is doing something to open up a hole in the fleet letting them through. I have a suspicion, but I can’t pin down anything definite. All I can do is send out our knights, pawns and local Golden Griffin division to try to stop them and every time I think we have put a stop to them stealing and destroying farms there is another raid. That is why I decided to send for you.”

“As you desire, we’ll start at once and track down the Boulthorians and put a stop to them,” Marlett said. “With your leave,” he nodded to her politely.

“You have my leave. I want you to keep me informed of your progress,” Baroness Hummphrian said, or rather ordered.

“Yes Anora, I will call you each day with our progress,” Marlett said. “By the way do you know exactly where this incident occurred and we will head out there right away.”

“Of course I do, these men got here a few minutes before you to let me know what is going on. I had already sent Robere to find out more and look things over. To get out there take a right out of the lot and follow the road to the third intersection and take the road directly out of town five miles and you’ll be almost there. Tell Robere I need him back here in an hour, we need to discuss dinner, we’re having the representatives from Queen Sallina of Kuulth over tonight,” the Baroness informed him, “And Marlett you will call me every four hours to update me.”

Marlett nodded and took the lead to bow and then he made a motion for the division to follow him. In a few minutes they were mounted again galloping down the road. As before people in traffic moved over to let the division ride on. They turned at the third intersection and clearly saw the smoke cloud, much smaller now due to the fire suppression crews, directly in front of them in the distance. Marlett pushed his horse forward and raced down the road.

In just a few minutes they found the scene. A black field of several acres and the ruins of three barns and a still burning farmhouse marked the place. Trance was shocked at what he saw. Off to the left huddled together must be the farmer and his family and just a few feet away were the farmhands. All around he saw several red tanker wagons pulled by teams of large robot horses and from the tankers were two or three hoses in the hands of the firemen and spraying water on everything that was still burning and smoldering.

Marlett dismounted and signaled everyone else to stay mounted. He looked around and walked toward a group of men gathered a short distance away examining one of the burned down barns. An older man with sharp blue eyes and nearly white hair cut in military fashion and neat mustache turned to Marlett and extended his hand. “Hello Robere,” Marlett said, “I see we have an issue. We came right away to help.”

“Yeah,” Robere said, “I was with Anora when she sent the summons. She was going to do it sooner but our captains thought they could put a stop to this. As you can see we can really use your help. I assume you saw Anora and got the scoop.”

“Yes sir, we just left her,” Marlett said with a grin then he looked around and added, “So, have you found out anything.”

“I think we have,” Robere said and led the way over to the wall, “Look at this burn mark. We think the fire started here. There is also a peculiar burn pattern to the field, the pattern doesn’t seem to make sense.”

Marlett knelt down and pulled out his comp pad to film around the area. Just then he stopped and looked down. He stepped back and took a better look and called the men over to him. “Ah, Robere, I know what they used to do all this damage.”

Robere stooped down and looked at what Marlett was pointing at and he stood up. “My God, that would explain what is going on. Do you think it’s a big one?”

Marlett shook his head, “No, it’s not big enough.”

“What is it,” Trance asked. He had ridden up a bit to get a better look.

Marlett looked up at him and said, “They have a dragon. I think by the tracks here it’s just a castle defender. That will make it slightly easier to deal with.”

“We have to take on a Boulthorian division and a dragon. There is no way, we are dead,” said Danien.

“I don’t know much about the dragon, but we always have a chance,” Trance shot at him. “There has to be a way to take out the dragon.”

“You’re right, it’s difficult but it can be done,” Marlett stated. “I have seen it done twice. The dragon is extremely dangerous. First off it has its primary weapon that is its flame weapon. It isn’t just flames that it shoots out. It is a special gel fuel that not only creates the burning flame, if you get some of the gel on you it keeps burning and is very difficult to put out. Then you have the jaws and teeth that can bite off limbs. And if that isn’t enough the claws on all four feet can kill you.”

Trance could not help looking stunned. “Okay, so it’s extremely dangerous. The flames and that flaming gel that keep us back and could kill us. And if we get close it can use its mouth or claws to kill. So you said it can be taken down, how do we do that?”

Marlett frowned then said, “That is all correct. It was a while back when I took part in taking down a castle protector. The designers of this dragon were kind of arrogant and never figured this out. When the dragon lifts its head some of the metal scales separate and if you have a strong sharp blade and get close at that moment you could sever the fuel lines to the flame unit. A really strong sharp blade could nearly sever the head not only cutting the fuel lines, but sever the power and communications lines as well. Also the dragon only has its eyes to direct it to its targets, a good arrow shot could take out the eyes so it can not see, however it just might go on a rampage. Also the main control unit, the beast’s brains are in its head. And this is really how arrogant the designers were and our biggest advantage. The metal of the dragon’s head is not the best. Just a few good smashes and you shut the dragon down. We just need some luck and skill to get up close to it.”

“Do you really think we have a chance? Fighting the Boulthorians and a dragon,” said Kammery dismayed.

Trance recognized the serious danger he was in, however he said, “We are Golden Griffins. This is our duty. You two sound scared, what did you think when you pursued being a Golden Griffin. I knew the moment I knew there were knights here like in the past. Growing up on Earth I was fascinated by them and always dreamed of being a knight. I watched a number of shows and motion picture shows of knights. I learned way back then what was involved being a knight and what could happen to me. And here I get to have my dream come true being a knight, more than that, a Golden Griffin. You two and the rest of this division grew up here, you should be used to this. You took your oath, you are here, this is our sworn duty to protect the kingdom, even here, and yes defending this state and area against a Boulthorian division with a dragon. I am scared, but I will do my duty to my very last heartbeat.” Trance could not believe that he had the courage to say this. Did he speak out of turn? “Sorry Major, it needed to be said.”

Marlett looked at him impressed. “That is why you have that badge and rank,” he said and turned his attention back to his purpose. “Now everyone spread out and search the ground, look for the dragon's tracks, they will direct us.” He turned to Robere who had been paying attention, “We were summoned to assist you and address this threat,” he looked back and a plan took form in his mind, “So this is what I propose, this attack seems to me that it was too close to the city, it would be prudent that when you have this under control you pull back and increase security on the city. We will deal with these Boulthorians and their dragon and send a message that should keep the Boulthorians away from this state. And one last thing, Anora would like you back at the capital as soon as possible. I guess you are hosting representatives of Queen Sallina of Kuulth. She actually said that she wanted you back in an hour, but you and I know her, so you probably should head back in the next few minutes.”

Robere smiled and saluted Marlett, “Yes we do. I’ll finish up here in a few minutes and leave instructions before riding back. You have our full cooperation, our pawns and knights will assist you if and when you call for them.” Robere turned and motioned to one of the pawns standing between them and the fire crews. “Captain Mort, I believe you heard. Pass the word to the other pawn and knight commanders to provide aid when called by Major Marlett. I take it that you can see that the rest of these fires are put out,” he turned away then turned back, “One more thing. As soon as the fire is out escort the Olemans to the city and get them rooms at the Aester Hotel, on the state.” Robere turned and raised his voice so the Olemans could hear him, “You can stay there till your house and barns are rebuilt. You should expect your compensation for your lost equipment and seed by the end of the week. That should help replace what you lost and get you back on you feet.” The Olemans waved their thanks and hugged each other.

Trance looked toward Gracer, “What did Robere mean by compensation? It sounded like the state would replace all of this.”

Gracer half grinned, “That is exactly right. You know just about everyone in the kingdom has insurance that will replace your house and property if something happens, like a fire. But insurance will not cover a farmer’s lost equipment, crop or animals, so the states have a provisional fund that will cover these types of loss. Some Baron and Baroness came up with that, they said that it not only helped the farmer, it also ultimately helped the state and kingdom. The compensation the farmers get is three fourths the amount for the lost equipment, crop, and animals.”

“That sounds like a fantastic idea and makes sense. I can see that, so the farmer isn’t ruined and he can get back to producing food for the state and kingdom,” Trance said. Then his eyes swept the area. “My goodness though, if the Boulthorians keep stealing and destroying farms and fields that alone would add another drain on the state's economy.”

“You're right,” said Zam, “I didn’t think about it at the time, but you're right. All this damage not only hurts the farmer and his family and removes crops and meat from the food supply, but it costs the state in these compensations. That is really starting to make me angry. Major, what is our next step if I may speak. I want a shot at them for this.”

“They’re right,” Zak said and looked the division over as righteous fury seemed to catch on, “What are your directions Major.”

Marlett was pleased at the division's renewed purpose. “Like I said, let’s spread out and look for tracks, they’ll direct us in the way they went.”

The division spread out and searched the ground for the dragon’s prints and any tracks left by the Boulthorians. Trance and Gracer were paired together and dismounted and stooped down and looked around followed closely by their horses. “It sort of looks to me that the damage goes this way,” Trance said, pointing east across the field. He took the lead and they walked stooped over for a few minutes. “There,” Trance said, spotting the distinct print of the dragon and close were a few hoof prints of armored horses.

“Definitely,” Gracer said as he got a closer look. “They look like they are heading out straight east.”

“Let’s follow these for a few more minutes to make sure and then get Marlett,” said Trance. He did not want them to start that direction and find that the Boulthorians had changed direction or tried to cover their tracks. After another ten minutes it seemed obvious that the Boulthorians were heading in a fairly straight line and were not covering their tracks. “Talk about arrogance. They must think that everyone will be focused on putting out the fires to come after them. And I have a feeling they are using the dragon for the sure fear effect. Who would want to challenge them with a dragon.”

“I agree with that,” Gracer said as he straightened up and walked up to his horse. They took note how far they had wandered and he reached up and activated his horse’s communicator. He tapped a couple keys and in a moment Marlett’s face appeared on the communicator screen. “Major, Trance and I have found where they are heading. We are pretty much straight east of you about twenty minutes out.”

“You two stay where you are and I’ll get the division together and come to you. Very good work,” Marlett said and returned Gracer’s salute.

“Marlett wants us to stay here, he is gathering the division and they will be here in a few minutes,” Gracer said.

“Okay,” Trance said and stood up and stretched. There was a slight flutter of fear, but he pushed it aside. He relaxed his stance as he stood by Odin. In a couple minutes he heard mechanical hoof beats and looking west saw Marlett and the approaching division. “I suppose we should mount up,” he said to Gracer and both of them mounted their horses.

Marlett stopped his horse beside Trance who pointed down at the track just in front of him. Marlett looked at the track and swung his eyes back the way they had come and then forward to the east. “I see that you were right. They are heading east. By the damage they have caused they shouldn’t be too far ahead of us. Bear you and Zak take the lead and scout in front. Get going we will be right behind. Hopefully we can catch them before they can do much more damage.”

Bear and Zak rode up, checked the tracks and then rode forward across fields and crossed roads. Following Marlett’s direction the rest of the division followed. Trance patted Odin as they rode, “Here we go are you ready.”

“Yes, I am ready. Let me turn my bows on the ruffian Boulthorian horses. I can avenge my previous rider,” said Odin’s mechanical voice.

“You’ll bring honor to him. We both shall,” Trance said as he flexed his hands on the reins.

Suddenly in the distance there rose up a roar and a spout of flame beyond a stand of trees. Trance saw Bear and Zak reign up their horses and signaled to Marlett who directed them forward with caution. They rode forward more cautiously and were soon caught up by the rest of the division. Another burst of flame and the voices of knights came to them as they approached the trees. Marlett carefully surveyed the area. “Captain Telliar, take the archers and go carefully to the right and move cautiously till you can get a good vantage point. Lieutenant Wyn takes half of the division to the left. The rest follow me.” He noticed that Trance was about to follow Wyn, “Trance, go with the archers.”

Trance was surprised but saluted. He set Odin’s controls and put his spear in its holder on Odin behind his saddle and took his bow. Then a spout of flame shot out towards them and he saw the Boulthorians. Almost surprising, below a banner of the dark carrion bird on a dark gray field was a blood red banner with a snarling hyena. A memory flickered and was immediately swept away at the site of the mechanical dragon.

“Archers stop and set arrows to bows, ready to fire at my command. Half of you pick out a knight and the others aim for that thing's eyes,” commanded Telliar.

At that moment the Boulthorians noticed the approaching Golden Griffins and their banners. The banner bearer, a corporal that rode next to Marlett bravely carried the banner of Cator, a Griffin holding up a raised claw hand on royal blue and the division’s banner, a golden lynx on royal purple. With a split second warning the Boulthorians organized, their commander screamed out orders and the dragon turned to focus on Marlett’s group and archers let fly arrows.

Trance dodged three arrows and taking aim let his first arrow fly. It found its mark and he drew another arrow to shoot. Soon the air was filled with flying death. An archer to his left fell to a Boulthorian arrow in his throat. Trance dodged again and shot another arrow as the dragon roared and shot fire at the nearest Golden Griffin. An arrow missed him by inches and he set another arrow and this time took aim at the dragon. Zing it just missed the eye and he took aim again as to his horror the dragon hit one of the axmen and he burst in flame on his horse. Nothing he could do, he took aim again and with furious calm aimed and let fly another arrow and this time it struck home.

The Boulthorian commander screamed, “Advance and kill them all!”

Boulthorians charged in three directions as Wyn’s group tried to surprise them. The dragon turned and just missed Mandor as he just dodged the flames. “No!” Trance screamed and he aimed another arrow. Unfortunately it missed and with the oncoming Boulthorians he quickly put his bow in its holder and drew his sword. He charged up to his first challenger and was surprised at the man’s strength and skill. Their swords clashed and clashed again. He had no time for memory of his first encounter with the Boulthorians in their more angular plate armor. Cold calm flooded him and his senses seemed to flow as he caught and deflected every swing from the Boulthorian swordsman. There, his opponent’s mistake and he struck. Blood burst and the man screamed as knowing that he was approaching death.

Trance didn’t have time to think about the man another moment. A Boulthorian with a battleaxe was almost on him. Trance had just a moment to adjust his shield and take the first mighty blow. His sword flashed and clashed against the ax and the knight was suddenly surprised. Trance kept his shield in place and blocked blow after blow as he slashed and thrust with his sword. A lucky swing and he drove his sword into the man. One more thrust and he ended the man’s life.

From the other side a lucky Golden Griffin spear took out the dragon's other eye. The mechanical beast roared in rage and fired flame and took out three unlucky Boulthorians. Trance was busy with another ax wielding knight as Hamon charged forward and took his horse around half a dozen Boulthorians, his hammer swinging and taking down two knights as he focused on trying to make his way to the dragon.

“Archers keep them back, let Hamon through to the dragon,” Marlett yelled as his bloody sword swiftly and deftly took another Boulthorians life. His tan and olive surcoat was splotched with blood.

Hamon knew it was crazy and he was probably going to die, but he was the only one close and he concentrated on taking out another Boulthorian and the dragon was there in front of him. It was raising its head to deliver another deadly blast of fire. Then from the other side and on the ground was Bear.

At six feet eight inches Bear was the largest member of the division. With his ax he cleaved a path through enemy lines nearly unafraid and heading straight at the dragon. He swung his shield and knocked down an enemy knight and with a swift blow of his ax ended the man’s life. The dragon just turned its head randomly toward him and it was then that Hamon made his way up to the dragon. He had only one chance and he tossed his shield and took both hands and he rose up as far as he could in his saddle and swung with all his might on the dragon’s head. Sparks went up like fireworks and the head and neck stretched up and a mighty blow from Bears ax cut fuel and power lines, the dragon shook violently before toppling over.

Furious and seeing he was outmatched as well as outnumbered, the Boulthorian commander yelled and turned and fled, signaling retreat. Almost a third of the Boulthorians suddenly realized they were defeated and turned to race after their commander. It was over but at a cost.

Trance thrust his sword at his last opponent, sending the man to his grave. He withdrew his sword and desperately tried to catch his breath, a mistake at the moment as the coppery scent of blood assaulted his nose. Before he could walk to find fresh air he noticed another Boulthorian and raised his sword. The furious knight suddenly realized he was alone. He turned and ran and spying an unmanned horse he mounted the dark gray mechanized horse and rode to catch up with the others in full retreat.

The Golden Griffins with the medical wagon rushed out and immediately started caring for the wounded. Trance looked at his hunter green surcoat splotched with blood. He stooped and took a dead Boulthorians surcoat and wiped his blade. He eyed the edge and noticed how straight and well honed and sharp the blade was. With the blade clean he returned it to his scabbard.

Marlett gave directions for them to gather up not only their dead, nine unfortunately including two young men that had just been commissioned with him, and the dead Boulthorians. The Boulthorian weapons were also collected and put in an empty storage locker. The weapons of the nine fallen Golden Griffins were returned to the lockers and Marlett was off to the side sending messages with his comp pad first to Baroness Anora Hummphrian, but also to his superiors and King Maximus. Lastly he sent the unfortunate news of the nine to their families and commissions to the Grind Stone for replacements.

“We need to keep our numbers,” Marlett said to Trance, who was collecting arrows. “I’m also requesting a special wagon to come and get that thing,” he said pointing to the motionless dragon.

Curiosity and memory clicked for Trance. “Did that division of Boulthorians have a name? We were told that they were hyenas.”

Marlett scowled before saying, “Actually I know exactly who they were. I haven’t had the pleasure before, but I have heard of them too often. That was the Zeloth division and I’m nearly surprised they didn’t put up more of a fight. We’ll stay in the area and make sure they don’t come back and if they do they’re going to be nastier the second go round.”

That evening in his room Trance had a moment to call home, “Hey mom, I just wanted you to know that I’m safe. We had to run off a bunch of Boulthorian thugs,” he wasn’t sure how much he should say. Would she panic if he mentioned the dragon? “We are staying here a few days to make sure they don’t return and try to do more damage.”

“Thank God you’re okay. How are your friends, did anyone get injured,” Eileen asked.

He knew she cared about his friends and really appreciated that, “Yeah everyone is okay, and well Zam got a gash, nothing to worry about. The medical team patched him up. I will check in with you tomorrow and let you know how things go. I am exhausted.”

“Okay, good night honey. We love you,” Eileen said and they disconnected. She turned away with tears streaming down her cheeks. She sniffed and hurried to get a handkerchief before Evan saw, too late. Evan did not let on and was polite as he asked her about how Trance was. Heather and Sammy came in and listened also.

Meanwhile Marlett had the division stay and hunt the raiding Boulthorians over the next four days. Before the newly commissioned Golden Griffins arrived another six were slain including Kammery. Danien had been saved by Trance on two occasions to his surprise. They stayed on another three days and the new Griffins arrived in time to assist in driving off one particularly persistent Boulthorian division. At last the Baroness was satisfied and held a banquet in their honor. Trance had called his family and reported in letting them know he was okay. Most importantly he received a call from Corena from Pikes Head. She got reports from her father the King, “I have been getting the reports Marlett has been sending dad, the King. Well I am sneaking looks at them really. Marlett is speaking very highly about you. It’s probably just me, but the way Marlett is talking about you and truly how well you are taking authority, you should get promoted.” Then to lighten their mood she went on, “And I have plans for when you get back to the capital,” she told him with a wink. “I can not wait to see you in person and put my arms around you.” Little did either of them know that it would be longer for him to return to the capital.

Chapter 26

Outbreak

The Golden Lynx division, dressed in their casual uniforms, was eating breakfast in the dining hall at the Uperian Rook, slightly smaller than the capitol building; it was the headquarters of the pawns and local knights. Trance had a plate of flatcakes, heniver eggs, and fried sliced sager, almost exactly like bacon. Baroness Anora Hummphrian had come over the day before and made sure that the cooks were doing their best to feed Marlett and his division.

“I want them to have whatever they ask for. Make sure they are well fed,” she ordered. Since the arrival of the Golden Lynx division it seemed that the Boulthorians had pulled back and stopped their assaults on the farms. She had been truly shocked to see the dragon brought back that first day of their arrival. “That explains most of those fires and why they were so difficult to put out. Damn them,” she exclaimed to Robere that evening. She sat in her chair troubled at the thought of the farmers, pawns, and knights that had lost their lives during the past few months. At last there was a light in the distance.

Trance sat peacefully taking another bite of flatcake when he saw a knight rush in and head straight for Major Marlett. “Excuse me Major,” the knight said as he saluted, the typical Althorian salute by placing his right palm on his heart and raising it up to his right side with his arm making close to a right angle.

“Yes what is it,” said Marlett from his seat and gave a salute back.

“Sir, Baroness Hummphrian sent me to get you and your captain and lieutenants right away. Oh, I forgot, she was told to get your warden also,” the knight said curiously.

“What could she want with us,” Marlett asked. This could not be good. Then the knight’s words rang through his head. Who could tell Anora anything? There was only one possible answer and it made him wonder more.

“I was just told to get you and bring you to the capital immediately.”

“Can we finish our breakfast,” Marlett asked, even knowing what the answer would be.

“I’m afraid not, at least at this moment. Sir, we need to go.”

“All right, come on guys,” Marlett said to Tellier, Wyn, Second Lieutenant Ocran, and Trance. They got up and followed the knight out of the hall and out of the building.

Trance trailed the others and wondered the whole time as they quickly walked the two hundred yards to the capital building why he was included. Certainly if something had happened and they were getting new orders it would be Marlett that was called, maybe the captain and two lieutenants would be called also. True his rank gave him some authority, but he didn’t think he qualified for this. I guess I’ll find out in a minute or three, he thought.

Soon they were being admitted to the capital building and they went to the main room where they had first gone in to meet with the Baroness. Anora was in her seat with her four advisors and Robere all wearing concerned faces and it took Marlett and the others just a moment to notice something different this time in the room. They stopped in front of the raised platform and there angled to the side was a large view screen. Actually it was a large kytherum and on the screen was King Maximus looking very grave and solemn.

“Your highness,” Marlett said surprised and immediately saluted. The other four men followed suit and Trance in particular tried hard to hide taking a deep calming breath.

“Hello Major, it’s good to see you. I’m pleased to see your command staff, Captain Tellier, a pleasure,” King Maximus said.

“Thank you, your highness,” said Tellier modestly and he bowed.

“My lieutenants, Wyn and Ocran,” said Marlett, introducing them as they bowed. Marlett knew the king already knew Trance, he was the princess’s consort, but he needed to follow protocol. “Of course you know my Warden,” he said, nodding to Trance whose face had turned pink and he bowed as well.

“Yes I do. How are you Trance, I hear that you are doing an amazing job as Warden,” King Maximus said.

Baroness Hummphrian had sat politely for the introductions and paid attention. This last introduction surprised her. She had seen the young man over the last few days with Marlett who had introduced him, however, this was new. That the king knew this young man made her wonder why. At the moment though, there were some serious matters. “Now that we have the introductions, which I would like to know how you know this young man Maximus, we have some major issues. I turn it to you Maxi, let them know what is going on.”

On the screen Maximus nodded and then looked forward as if he was right there talking to them. This was difficult. While he was delighted to see that Trance was okay, Anora was right, so he said, “Baroness Hummphrian is right, we have an emergency. So while you have been very successful driving the Boulthorians out of Amberia, it seems that there has been an outbreak of Boulthorian assaults all over the kingdom. I know that you have unfortunately had some losses, and I am very happy to see Trance very much alive and well. Your family and Corena are very proud of you. However, I need to let you know that our most serious issue is that there has been a lot of activity in the air space above the Boulthorian’s main outpost. We have no idea what Axlor is planning and all they are saying is that they are just bringing in supplies, but some of the ships coming down are too large for supply craft, they are more like they are building up a large assault force. We have a serious fear that they are planning to lay siege to Bengal Castle,” Maximus told them.

“That would take at least four regiments to lay siege to that castle, and maybe another two to actually take it. That is one of the most fortified fortresses,” Marlett said. “Do you think the Boulthorians have landed that many men and arms?”

“Pardon me Major and your highness,” Trance said tentatively. “Why would the Boulthorians attempt to assault that castle? Certainly they have records of the last time they tried and how many men they lost,” he said as he remembered his military history lessons.

Bengal Castle was featured in a number of accounts not only in military history, but also in the history of the kingdom and a major landmark. Situated on a prominent hill in the foothills leading up to the Crown Mountains it defended one of the main roads leading up to that unique mountain range. The sides of the hill had a moderate grade and were fairly clear of trees and brush giving a full view for watchmen and archers along the castle's walls and towers which were always patrolled. The knights and pawns stationed there knew their sacred duty to defend that road and surrounding communities. The nearest Golden Griffins were the Cerulean Crown Cats at Ulean Shield Rook, which was fifteen miles from Apollis Castle, the Griffin embassy. While the Ulean Shield Rook was up in the Crown Mountains and provided extra defense to the Griffins on the west, Bengal Castle provided defense from the south and east. Plus Bengal Castle was the primary location of the landing site for the Griffins when they would arrive from Graffes, the home planet of the Griffins. It was always exciting for new recruits to the castle to see a Griffin ship either land or take off from one of the seven landing pads.

“The War Council doesn’t know yet. We don’t know if that is their plan or not,” Maximus said. “Like you mentioned, the last time they came out and tried to take Bengal Castle they hoped to set it up as another major outpost here in Cator. From there they could launch raids to a number of states and wreak havoc. They do enough damage as is.”

“You’re right,” Anora said. “I have had a suspicion of that for a while. I think they were trying to do something similar here. By stealing and destroying farms that would impact the food supplies to most of the kingdom. In fact two days ago a division of knights came across what looked like the beginning foundation of a Boulthorian outpost just two hundred miles south of Uperian.”

Trance had seen the report on the site. Why had they abandoned it and why had nobody known about it. Then he thought about Bengal Castle and the last time it was assaulted, “As I recall, didn’t they send five regiments last time, fifty-three years ago and they lost almost a third of them just from the archers, spearmen, and the castles defenses before reinforcements from Ulean Shield Rook arrived with a couple other divisions that came up from their rear and flank. And when they finally fled in retreat they had a division and a half left.” Trance tried to do the math in his head that a Boulthorian division was ninety-five men, and a regiment was two divisions. That was nine hundred and fifty men, nearly a thousand knights they sent against the castle, and according to reports only one hundred and forty, possibly less, retreated and escaped. Surprising since the castle hosts four pawn divisions and two knight divisions, four hundred and fifty men total. There were casualties to the defenders of the castle as well. He thought he remembered that the castle lost one hundred and ninety men during the siege.

“We are here to serve, your highness,” Marlett said boldly. “What is it you require of us?”

“We can not lose that castle. I have struggled with this and I have met several times with the war counsel and we have decided that we need you to leave Uperian immediately and head to Bengal Castle to provide aid and additional defense,” Maximus said and raised a hand before Marlett could respond, “We have summoned three other Golden Griffin divisions to head there also. With luck you can win the race to get there before the Boulthorians.”

Marlett was shocked. “That is almost two thousand miles from here,” he said, “Of course we will leave immediately. I pray we have time to get there. I have two questions. First, have the Boulthorians left for the castle, and second is who else have you summoned for this mission.”

“Our current information is that they have not left their base yet, either marching out or taking flight with their troop ships. As far as the other divisions, we summoned the Bronze Caracals, the Valley Ocelots, and the Brass Leopards.”

Marlett tried hard not to groan. He knew that the Bronze Caracals and Valley Ocelots were fairly close, they could get there in a couple days. The Brass Leopards were further away and would take longer to get there, if they actually left the comfort of their home base. “Very well, I will get my men on the road in an hour. Baroness, it has been a pleasure assisting you these few days. Your highness, I take it we have your leave.”

“You have it, and ride with speed,” King Maximus said and returned Marlett’s salute. “Anora I need to discuss a few items with you,” he said as Marlett led the way out of the chamber.

Outside the building Marlett picked up his pace. “Okay, we have a little time, not much, but a little,” he muttered as he kept up his pace for the dinning hall. As they entered the hall Marlett motioned for the others to go back to their seats, “Hup, attention everyone.” The division stopped what they were doing and turned to face him, “We have orders from King Maximus himself.”

“King Maximus, it must be serious. What has happened, where are we needed,” Bear asked.

“It is serious. It seems that the Boulthorians are gathering a large force at their outpost and they are presumed to make an assault on Bengal Castle and we have been ordered to head there immediately to provide extra aid and defense.”

“That is crazy,” said Zak, “Bengal Castle is,” he took a moment to think, “That is two thousand miles from here in Kronaland and their outpost is almost half way between us and Bengal Castle. Have they left for it already.”

“Yes, we all should know that. Our current information is that they have not left their outpost yet; this gives us a little time, I hope, but just a little time. I know we all need our strength, so finish your breakfast then as swiftly as you can I need you to get your stuff together and don your armor and get ready to ride,” he looked at his chron, “We need to ride in forty minutes. Lets go men, we have miles to go and little time.”

Instantly everyone dug into his breakfast. A few men got up and got another plate of food and ate. Minutes later the men were clearing plates and heading for the door and off to their rooms. Trance was sharing a room with his friend Zam this time and the two quickly made it to the room and packed their bags. Minutes later they left the room and turned in the keys at the desk and walked as quickly as possible out to the armor carrier. Marlett was waiting for them already in his armor and a glance back showed more of the division coming out the door.

Trance already knew which carrier had his armor and he headed for it. Efficiently, he changed into his armor and grabbed his weapons. He exited the changing room making room for another division member and headed for the stable to get Odin. “How are you? Are you ready to go for a ride,” Trance asked his horse as he mounted and settled in the saddle.

“I am fully charged and ready to go. I did a full diagnostic exam last night while I was charging. I downloaded some new updates to my systems and I learned about where we are probably going. I am not sure if we can get to Bengal Castle in time.”

Trance was surprised at the response and asked, “How did you learn that we are headed to Bengal Castle?”

“As I was downloading the updates my system stumbled upon four messages about the Boulthorians building up troops at their outpost and the high probability that they are once again going to try to take the castle. One message I came across was a communiqué from the Boulthorians about the plan to assault Bengal Castle. However, I saw something that was missed by King Maximus and the war counsel,” Odin said.

That took Trance by surprise. “What did the king and his counsel miss? And yes, I was a part of the division leaders that got the orders from King Maximus himself sending us to Bengal Castle,” Trance said as he rode Odin back toward the armor carriers and medical wagon.

“That is very good that you are in such a position,” Odin’s young soldier voice said. “I am sure that I learned something that the king and his counsel do not know. I found out that the Boulthorians are building up a lot of men.”

“Yes, they are building up to try to take that castle,” Trance said, “They had already learned that.”

“Yes you are right. However, what they do not know is that they are building up a lot more men than what they need to assault and take Bengal Castle. There is another plan. They do want to take the castle, but there was something more, I did not learn what else is planned, but taking Bengal Castle is only a portion of what they are planning. I think they are planning something more.”

Trance was speechless for a few moments. Then noticing that they were riding right up among the gathering division. “Odin, for now, let’s keep that between the two of us. Do not divulge that to anyone unless I give you authorization. Let’s get to Bengal Castle and make sure it is not taken.”

“Yes sir. I will lock away the information till later. When I am charging later I will try to learn more.”

“Good, then let me know what you discover,” Trance said. Then he had a thought as he rode up to Marlett. “Major, I was wondering a couple things.”

Marlett turned to him and raised his helmet's visor to see him better, “What were you wondering.”

“I was just thinking that there would be a lot of men for the Boulthorians to march out across the country. If they did, would there not be a host of our troops to march out and meet them to either drive them back or slow them down. So the logical thing I wondered is that they will probably use their troop ships to fly out and land at Bengal Castle. They could get there in a matter of a couple hours,” Trance said.

“That is absolutely correct. That is exactly how they will launch their assault. As you know they dare not land in the castle grounds, they have to land outside the castle and lay siege to it from there. You of course know why, right,” Marlett responded.

Trance took a moment to think, “It would be considered an act of war should they dare do that. In fact that is one of the ways one country or planet can openly declare war on a kingdom or planet. I can kind of see why they would not want to do that; however, with their increase in raids and now this, I think they are getting very close to declaring war on us.”

“That is hitting the bullseye,” Marlett said. Still seeing the look on Trance’s face he asked, “Do you have something more to add?”

“I was just wondering if that was the case, couldn’t we get a troop ship to take us there,” Trance said.

Marlett leaned back and actually laughed, “Trance that is one of the things I really like about you. Yes, that would make amazing sense to do that and would indeed get us there hopefully ahead of them and we could just land inside the castle grounds and assist in getting our defenses set up; however, taking a troop ship would alert the Boulthorians that we are on to them and they would accelerate their plans and that could be an awful mess. They would certainly try to shoot us out of the air and they could really come after us and that would be close to both of us declaring war. So even though we will ride there as fast as we can and we are definitely slower than any troop ship, this is our best chance. Even if they arrive before us, they might be distracted up front and we can catch them by surprise and assault them from the rear.”

“I understand. Thank you for listening,” Trance said.

“Not a problem,” Marlett said. Then he raised his voice slightly as most of the division was arriving and robot horses were hitched to the wagons, “Listen up, we have a long road ahead of us and very little time. We will make a few stops along the way, so when we do, do not lag behind. All right, let’s get going,” and he started off and down the road.

The division quickly followed and like before traffic parted in front of them. In no time at all they were galloping down the road and Trance took a glance to see how fast they were moving and was almost surprised that they were racing between seventy-five miles per hour to eighty miles an hour. Trance was so glad his saddle was comfortable. He was also glad he had found and installed the race horse leg motors, actually he did not know that was what they were when he had replaced Odin’s old leg motors. The motors had come from an unfortunate racehorse that had wrecked, however, it’s leg motors were in excellent shape.

Marlett knew from experience that this was a delicate race. He monitored his horse’s communications for word that the Boulthorians had launched the troop ships. Hopefully it will be in a week or later, or never. Internally he began planning the route they should take and where they should stop. Telliar rode up close to him to consult.

“How long do you think we have,” Telliar asked.

“I don’t know,” Marlett answered. “We have been riding for over two hours and I think we should probably stop in another hour. Give everyone a quick break and then get going again. We’ll stop around midday someplace so they can sit down and eat.” He had learned from experience how to pace his men, knowing how far and fast to drive them before stopping for a break, even giving himself one. He prided himself that he knew where the stops were along the road where they could stop for a moment to use a restroom or to stop and eat and drink and a place where they could stay the night and get some sleep. It was the best way to keep them fresh, especially in a time like this; they would need their strength and energy to get them to Bengal Castle and then to defend it.

“Sounds like a good plan,” Telliar said. “I could surely use a rest stop in a little while. Do you think we can make it?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. I pray we can, we can’t run any faster and harder, the horses can’t take it and it would wear the guys out. If we pace it out, all of us can get there in good shape,” Marlett replied. “Like any mission, let’s take this one step at a time.”

“You’re right,” Telliar said as he tried to relax more in his saddle.

Over the next three days Marlett led the division down the road the way they had gone to Uperian. He kept them to their routine and he constantly monitored for news and the roads up ahead. They were now on one of the main highways fifty mile north of Caldora. Whew, they were at least this far. A prickling feeling since the Boulthorians were around a hundred miles north of them in Yowland. That state had a large military presence, with local militia, knights, pawns, and Golden Griffins all of them kept a watchful distance of two hundred miles from the outpost. The peace there was as delicate as a plate glass window.

Odin had been easily keeping pace with Marlett and the rest of the division. Trance had overheard a few division members commenting that the pace Marlett was setting was heating up their horse’s leg motors and there was some concern that they would need to get maintenance at their next real stop. Trance tried hard to keep a straight face as he listened to these comments after all only a few knew about Odin’s leg motors and that there were times he was holding Odin back otherwise he and Odin would easily outrace Marlett on his horse.

They had left the city of Fortin and were approaching the foothills to the Kwen Mountains, one of the central mountain ranges in the kingdom. More and more trees lined both sides of the road leading into a full forest that they would pass through as they approached the mountain road that would wind them up and over Zarah’s peak. Still early in the morning, Marlett wanted them to reach the peak and stop at the Shepherd’s View, the large restaurant and gift shop at the peak with spectacular views over the area. Large herds of afflors the massive elk lived and roamed the area.

They had all just rode around a curve in the road and were starting uphill with the Mosem River flowing on their right. “Ah,” came a yell from behind as a spearman screamed and fell from his horse reaching back at the arrow sticking in his back.

Trance spun in his saddle to look back as the man fell still yelling in agony and his familiar prickle flared up and instantly he raised his shield and yelled, “Look out!”

Marlett jerked in his saddle and spun to see what the issue was and immediately whipped his head to the left just as a fleet of arrows sped out of the trees. He raised his shield in time to block several arrows aimed at him. “Shields, it’s an ambush. Everyone to arms!” His hand went to his sword just in time as the hidden Boulthorians burst from the trees.

With two arrows stuck in his shield, Trance kept it raised and drew his sword and swiftly blocked the blow from a lethal spiked mace. He blocked several blows with his shield and sword and fought to keep in the saddle as the Boulthorian knight was lusting for his death. Whether from instinct or skill Trance swung his sword blocking and driving the mace away from him and giving him his opening and with lethal force the sword struck below the man's breastplate and drove into a weak spot in the armor. No time to relax another enemy knight was on him.

The air was filled with the deadly song of clashing weapons. Swords, axes, maces, and Hamon’s hammer crashed against shields, other weapons and armor. Trance backed up and swiftly took down another knight and turned to aid Mandor with the Boulthorian knight bearing down on him. To the left Gracer and Zam worked together taking on three Boulthorians, two more mace men and a swordsman. Telliar had been knocked off his horse and was ducking and blocking a knight coming at him with a spiked flail. Telliar kept his shield raised as the Boulthorian swung the deadly spiked ball on its chain at him.

Trance swung his sword into another enemy knight and looked almost in time to see Telliar’s mistake. While Telliar had been focused on the Boulthorian on his warhorse with the flail, behind him three Boulthorian archers were setting arrows to bowstrings. “No!” Trance screamed and turned Odin toward them and swiftly turned Odin’s deadly crossbow cannons on the archers. Two of them went down immediately with stunned expressions as life flowed out of them. The third archer let loose and Telliar stumbled forward as the arrow struck him. The Boulthorian immediately struck Telliar’s shield out of his hand with the flail. Three more Boulthorian archers came down and set up as Trance watched in horror as they took deadly aim and let fly their arrows. Telliar went down and the Boulthorian on horseback was ready to deal a final blow when Trance rode up.

Odin’s furious and powerful micro compound bows on its rotating mechanism fired rapidly and mowed down the three Boulthorian archers and Trance felt cold fury as he raised his shield to take a blow from the flail and he held his sword firmly ready to strike. The knight barely saw him coming and turned too late to swing the flail in his direction. Trance struck the man in the side and then the sword drove through the man’s armor near his heart. Trance leaped down to tend to Telliar and felt hot tears as he got to him.

Dropping his sword and shield to turn Telliar over to try to help him. Something inside him already let him know that he was too late. Trance said a hurried prayer knowing that Telliar was no longer in pain and was in a much better place than the bloody mountain road where Trance was kneeling. Trance reached for his fallen weapons when something swift and blunt caught the back of his helmet and he went down and he saw stars right before he crashed to the ground unconscious. He never felt himself dragged off the road to the left.

Chapter 27

Broken Chains

Am I dead or alive, Trance thought as he became aware of himself. He was lying on the ground, but it didn’t feel like the mountain road. Where was he? The scent of grass now filtered in. Could be Heaven, except for the throbbing pain from the back of his head. He reached a hand to his head and he was momentarily surprised that he was not wearing his helmet and he had a small lump on his head. Well the helmet had taken the majority of the blow from a Boulthorian knight with a mace.

Umf, okay, I must be alive, that is positive. All right, that question seems to be answered. He opened his eyes and instantly confirmed that he was face down on the ground, in particular it seemed like a mowed lawn. Has all of this been a dream and he had hit his head mowing a lawn. No, he had too many memories of training, dates with Corena, and serving the Baroness, and of course the fight on the mountain road. Where had he been heading? That’s right they had been racing to get to Bengal Castle to help defend it.

He still had the pain in the head, but he was pushing it aside as he took a look around and tried to rise up. There was a slight noise to his left. He looked down to see that there was a manacle and chain on his left wrist. His eyes followed the chain to a large stake in the ground. About five feet of it was above ground with the top reminding him of a nail. How much was in the ground, he did not know. Prisoner, frack, had he been captured. He looked to his right and saw a line or maybe thirty stakes and chained to them were Althorian knights, maybe some of them were pawns or Golden Griffins. Then as he cleared his eyes and looked further there was a second row of stakes with chained men behind him.

“Huh, you’re awake at last,” said the man next to him. “I never thought I would see you captured. I would have made bets that you’d be slain on some field. How did you let this happen?”

That voice was slightly familiar. It had been rare occasions that he had heard it. Trance sat up and looked directly at, “Jerethone. How did I get here, how in blazes did you get here? Wait,” he shook his head slightly and memory slid in place. “Ah, the Brass Leopards were summoned to assist in the defense of Bengal Castle also. I’m guessing that your division was ambushed also.”

Jerethone nodded, “You could say that. We got a few miles to the other side of Zarah’s peak when this Boulthorian division came at us from all sides. I took down seven men before being struck from behind.”

“What about Rex, and the rest of your division,” Trance asked.

“Ah, Rex tried to set up our defense and used one of his strategies only,” Jerethone shrugged.

“Why did he take command, he wasn’t your captain,” Trance said.

“Oh well, his rank was only a sham. His father you know,” Jerethone stated.

Trance nodded agreement, “That sounds like how he is. If I remember from strategy class he had some ideas about defending against an ambush in the mountains and if I’m right he didn’t score very well.”

“That would be correct. And he had time to use one of your strategies and he wouldn’t do it. I know because right before I was hit and captured I asked him about it.”

“What,” asked Trance shocked, “He wouldn’t use one of my suggestions that could have helped you.”

“Ha, he is so convinced of his ultimate superiority over you and that he would rather sacrifice his division than admit you were even slightly right. And I trusted him,” Jerethone spat.

“Yeah, I trusted him also,” said the man on the other side of Jerethone. “I saw him four minutes after you were captured and he finally set up a proper defense. We were finally starting to beat the Boulthorians back when they broke through. Just before I was taken Rex signaled retreat and he and the majority of the division left me and two other spearmen behind to give them cover. They ran us down, I was captured while my companions were slain right there in front of me.”

Trance sat in thought. If the Brass Leopards were ambushed as well as his division the Golden Lynx, could the other two Golden Griffin divisions be ambushed, and how had the Boulthorians known where to set up. His head hurt, this time not from the lump. His head dropped as thoughts continued to race across his brain.

“So what happened to you? The high and mighty swordsman from Earth,” taunted Jerethone.

Trance looked up and felt his fury rise, “We were ambushed, sounds familiar, and I was knocked out and taken prisoner while trying to defend our captain who was killed by some,” he fought to keep his voice steady as he noticed for the first time an armed Boulthorian guard looking his way. Also he could have been profane, however, it was a mental effort, he was a Golden Griffin and he considered that put him in a higher standard. “They shot him in the back.” He turned to the Boulthorian knight and glared at the man.

Jerethone looked at him curiously. Internally he had a conflict going. There was what Rex was always spouting off about him, and here was the man in front of him. Then there was a nagging thought, could he know or suspect. How could he know? I’ll have to watch and listen to learn the truth. Did the truth matter?

Trance needed to stand and stretch. He found that he could stand and nearly put his left hand up and over his head. The manacle rubbed his left wrist and he pulled at it. The chain held. It was then he fully looked at himself and the others chained. His armor had been removed and he was wearing just the light and cut resistant fabric layer that reminded him of long underwear. It was comfortable and water wicking, yet with the impression of what it looked like to him he felt mildly embarrassed.

Now that he was standing he decided to look around. All the prisoners, including him, were in the grounds of what looked to be a small fort. The walls looked like a board stockade fence that looked to be ten feet tall. He estimated that the grounds were about one hundred yards by one hundred yards and in the middle was a two story stone building with what looked like a deck off the second story facing them with maybe a dozen archers lazily watching them.

“Sit,” yelled one on the guards walking toward him. Most prisoners sat depressed once they were captured and realized where they were.

Trance turned to him. “I need to stretch,” he said and raised his arms again. He knew he couldn’t do anything and that he was probably about to be punished.

The guard raised his visor and glared at the new prisoner. “I said sit!” This was new and he was surprised.

A slight tremor went through him, and Trance knew that this might be his fate. This might be my last day. Lord give me courage and strength, he prayed. If this were his final moments he would face them standing. The guard approached him and Trance knew that some of the other prisoners were watching and backed away from him. Fine, let them see who he was and that he would not sit, bow or kneel. Was this courage or stupidity? He tried to gulp and had no saliva.

“Hold,” said a commanding voice behind him and Trance looked over his shoulder at a large Boulthorian knight approaching them. “Stand down sergeant. I said back down!” the knight rumbled and the approaching guard halted and continued to glare at his prisoner. “Finally I see we have a man of courage. I had thought that the Golden Griffins of Cator were cowards without their fancy armor.” Many of the prisoners bristled with the jibe.

Trance turned to face the man, obviously he was the captain. He sized him up in his armor and noticed the man had a scimitar in his scabbard and he was holding his helmet in his left hand. “First I think you are wrong. These are all brave courageous men,” he said boldly and it did not matter to him that they were acting like there was no hope and they were not acting like men of courage. That was not his point, and he felt the trickle of fear. The Lord is my Shepherd, and if I am about to see him then let me be an example and face my fate on my feet. “I might be chained at the moment, but I am not your prisoner.”

“Oh you are not,” laughed the Boulthorian captain and he looked at his guards and their laughter filled the air. “So if you are not my prisoner what are you?”

“I am a Golden Griffin,” Trance said in a carrying voice as his eyes swept over the place again and he recalled seeing a map in Marlett’s room the night before. This looked like what the map showed as a very old abandoned Cator fort. “I am here by my life or death to liberate these men and retake this Althorian fort that you have taken illegally.” His insides cringed slightly as he had no idea where the words came from. How in Heaven was he to pull this off and how were the prisoners taking his words? Did his words have any impact?

The captain tilted his head back and roared with laughter, “That has to be the best joke I have heard in five months. That would be some act for you to follow through. Have you taken a look around? We are in the forest some miles away from the nearest road, that fence is ten feet high made of good solid wood. My archers there on the deck are excellent bowmen, and that is a solid well built rook, mind you a small one, and you are chained to a stake in the ground. Oh and by the way, we are armored and armed, what do you have.”

Memory was working in his favor, how he had no idea. Help me Lord, and then the words came, “I might not be armored or armed as you say, but by this time tomorrow you will be witness to my words. Now if I am not mistaken by treaty on how you are to treat prisoners, have they had anything to eat or drink, if not get it for them and I mean now captain.”

The captain was totally taken back. Never had a prisoner talked to him this way. The prisoner spoke clearly with such conviction. Surely he knows that his life is in my hands so he spoke, “That is another great joke. You expect to give me orders when your life is here in my hands. I can give the order and in an instant one of my archers could fill you with arrows or the sergeant there could take his ax and remove your head. Yet you stand knowing this and dare ask for food and drink for these men when not one of them has the bronze to stand with you.”

Trance had no idea why he was still standing, however, he locked his eyes with those of the Boulthorian captain. “All of that is true. You have your weapons and armor and could easily have me killed. But you are wrong, my life is not in your hands, my life is in the Lords. If it is his will and this is my last hour, then I will face my last hour standing. In the meantime if you have not fed or given drink to these men you are in violation of the treaty and eventually you will face the consequences of that. So I suggest captain that you either slay me now or get these men something to eat and drink, and make sure it is something you yourself would eat and get them some clean water to drink,” now he felt himself shaking not from fear but from rage.

The captain stood looking at this peculiar prisoner. There was something about him that disturbed him and his hand seemed to drift to the lethal single edged sword. How easy it would be to draw it and take the man down right here. Why didn’t he do it? He stood there considering as the prisoner stood and kept looking him directly in the eye. “You seem very certain about your life. What of the life of any of them,” he asked silkily and now he drew his scimitar and held it loosely at his side. “I could have any of them slain just as easily as you. Are their lives in my hand or yours?”

Trance did not look away. He sensed the men chained back further away and some may even have started shaking with terror. “Once again you are mistaken. Their lives are in the Lord’s hands as is their fate.” Lord, I pray and thank you for my life and I pray for the life of these men. Please continue to help me. “One other thing you need to know, captain, at this time tomorrow your life will be in my hand, so as I said, get these men something to eat and water to satisfy their thirst. Everyone is waiting, so decide now.”

The Boulthorian captain was now more conflicted. What was it about this prisoner? He lightly swung his scimitar, ticking away time with everyone watching. It occurred to him that this was a bluff, but the man never moved his eyes. He took another step closer and he raised the weapon, still the prisoner did not flinch. He suddenly sheathed his sword, “Feed them and get them water,” he commanded. Before he turned he added, “And make it something good to eat, and clear water, it might be their last meal.” He gave a slight nod to Trance and stalked back to the building. Noticing that nobody had moved he stopped and raised his voice, “Now!”

“You heard the captain,” roared the sergeant to some guards standing nearby, “Get the prisoners a decent meal and fresh water to drink and clean dishes and cups,” he added looking at Trance who acknowledged him.

Trance was stunned at how his words had been taken and followed. Now that the captain had given his orders and walked away Trance swung his eyes to the sergeant and now that the orders for food and water were being followed he finally took a deep calming breath and eased down to sit, he wasn’t sure his legs would keep him upright for much longer. Even though he was now sitting he did his best to keep his back straight and he kept his eyes on the sergeant and the guards. Okay, they are getting them food, now how in the world was he going to keep everyone alive till tomorrow and what then.

“Are you out of your mind,” Jerethone said. “You could have gotten all of us killed.”

Trance turned to him and looked him in the eye, “I am in my right mind and we are all still here. The captain could have killed me at any time and didn’t, I have no idea why or why I said half of what I said. But it’s going to make him think all day and into tomorrow.”

“About tomorrow, you made a couple claims about getting us free. So, what trick are you going to pull then? You are in the same position as us. Your left wrist is in a manacle with a chain connected to a collar on that stake in the ground. Do you somehow have a key hidden someplace to unlock yourself and then what, you have no weapon. They will execute you this time tomorrow and we will follow,” Jerethone said half in mocking jest and half misery. All he could see was his impending death either later that day or tomorrow.

Trance turned away and studied his surroundings as some of the other prisoners mumbled. Soon however they stopped as four guards approached them, two were handing down large bowls of a vegetable stew and two other Boulthorian guards were handing down cups of water. One more guard stood by with a pitcher to refill cups. Trance watched and even though he was hungry and thirsty he carefully watched and made sure all of the other prisoners, including Jerethone, got food and water first.

Jerethone watched Trance as he finally got a bowl and cup. Rex would never have done what Trance did and said. How curious. He could have demanded getting food and water first after bulling over the captain to start with. Rex and his father hated this guy so much and he himself had made sure Trance lost a few competitions last year in school.

Trance ate and drank his water and made sure the other prisoners got enough food and water before he asked for more. A look at his wrist and he saw that his chron was missing, he didn’t know what time it was. Should he ask about that or not? No, keep silent, he felt and told himself. He took another sip of water and did his best to relax and let his thoughts go. In this relaxed state he thought about the rook and he tried to envision what the inside looked like. Certainly there were rooms for the guards to sleep in, a kitchen and probably a dining hall. Then he thought about something that caught his attention.

Where was the armory? There had to be an armory to hold the Boulthorian’s weapons. Then the major thought, where was their armor and weapons stored, could they possibly be in the same place and then he considered where he would have the armory. It then came to him and it was like someone started to place a plan in his mind, just like the words he said to the captain. Thank you God, thank you for what to say and helping me. Please help me bring these men out of here. Then he turned his attention to the stake.

One of the guards walked past him and was out of earshot when he scooted closer to the stake and gave it a quick shove and wiggle. To his surprise as well as Jerethone’s, as the Brass Leopard archer was watching him closely, the stake moved slightly. He gave the stake another quick shove and it moved again. Now his plan started to take shape, would it work. With the Lord’s help he might have a chance, or he would meet his fate.

The day seemed to pass slowly and he kept testing the stake every time the sergeant or one of the guards wasn’t watching him. “What are you doing,” Jerethone asked quietly.

“I’m loosening the stake,” Trance said just as softly. “I don’t know how deep it is in the ground, but if I can get it out of the ground I might have a chance. Not much of one, but if they are going to kill me, it will be while I am standing and fighting.” He looked at Jerethone and the prisoners immediately nearby. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I am not going to give up and just lay down. If they want to execute me they’ll have to do it with me facing them. They can only kill me once.”

“You are not sane. They will kill you, either some time today or certainly tomorrow with what you declared,” Jerethone said. “And let’s say you get going, how do you plan to free us? There are sixty of us, are you going to pull up all of our stakes,” he taunted.

Trance threw Jerethone a look, “I am curious where your faith and courage went. As I said we are Golden Griffins and we have a mission. Right now our focus should be on how to escape and then we have to get to Bengal Castle. That is our mission. Why did you desire to be a Golden Griffin, to just strut around and feel superior to the other knights and pawns, or did you want to be one of the elite and use your skills to defend our kingdom and planet? Here it is, all of you, this is your chance to decide what you want your legacy to be.” He shoved the stake again.

Jerethone sat back and pondered what Trance said. True it had been a dream of his to be a Golden Griffin, to be elite. He was a fourth generation to go into military service. His great-grandfather had been an archer and scout pawn, and his grandfather had been a knight. Jerethone’s father had tried valiantly to be a Golden Griffin as an archer only to miss that goal by three points in archery qualification. He had the benefit of his lineage and happened to go to school with Rex who had been one of the best Golden Griffin prospects in many years and an excellent captain, at least in the opinion of their teammates.

Still, Jerethone was puzzled by Trance. To his mind Trance was not acting like a captain that he knew of. Rex had always been an excellent and skilled knight, however, he excelled in directing his men out in front of him and how to use them to achieve his goal. Carefully in competitions he had studied Trance and was confused about how he was so successful even though Trance seemed to put himself in the lead and would step in to defend and protect his men even putting himself in danger as a result. In his mind if Trance kept it up he would not last very long.

The most puzzling thing to Jerethone was why did Rex and his dad want Trance to perish or disappear. Wouldn’t he get slain early the way he was, it didn’t make sense. He would have to study him more.

Evening approached and the guards again brought bowls of the vegetable stew and water. As before Trance made sure everyone got theirs before he got any. “What are you up to,” Jerethone asked him. “This makes no sense, why are you waiting for us to get food and drink before you?”

Trance looked him in the eye, “If you don’t know by now, then you won’t get it even if I tried to explain it to you. Eat, you’ll need your strength tomorrow.” He sat back and when he knew the guards were not watching he gave the stake another quick shove.

“By the way what is the issue with the stake? Even if you can get it out of the ground what can you do, you still have no weapon and you’ll never get out of here and then not only will you get executed they will execute us,” Jerethone said dismally.

“You are so negative for a Golden Griffin,” Trance said, “You saw me in competitions, what kind of captain do you think I was in school. Do you actually think I don’t have a plan to release all of you? If that is what you think then you didn’t pay that much attention to me. Shame another with wasted talent.” He reached out and shoved the stake again.

“What do you mean wasted talent,” snapped Jerethone, “You should know that I am one of the best archers ever, outscoring everyone and setting a new record in qualifications and my bravery has never been challenged.”

“Huh,” Trance replied keeping his voice level, “Consider it challenged. If any of you had real courage you would have stood with me earlier.” At that many of the captured Golden Griffins grumbled at him. Tough, Trance thought, we will see what happens tomorrow. He sat back relaxed and he looked up as the stars came out.

In the cool and peace of the evening Trance relaxed and prayed and slept a while. Jerethone and most of the others lay down and slept. A few whimpered and cried thinking dismally of their fate the next morning. Trance did his best not to focus on them. Then before he fully slept the plan dropped in his head and he grinned grimly and slept.

He woke in the morning and looked around to set everything in place in his mind. Jerethone lay as far from him as possible and shuddered in troubled sleep. Trance stretched and stood, drawing the attention of the Boulthorian sergeant. “So, what is it you want this morning? A blanket, a hot bath, breakfast in the hall,” he taunted.

Trance looked at him and stretched again, raising his arms over his head. As he flexed his arms he heard another voice come from above. “I see you are awake,” said the captain. “I see from my chron that it is almost the designated time. So what are your demands this morning.”

Trance looked up at him, he was nearly ready for his plan, and said, “I am going to give you a chance to let these men go, with their armor, weapons and horses. Then you are to leave this rook, you have two minutes to decide.”

The captain and his guards and the sergeant all burst out laughing. “That is even a better joke than you told yesterday. You just want me to release all of you with your arms and armor and horses and trust you leave in peace without a fight and we just leave for our main outpost. Why should we, you are in our hands and this is such a comfortable rook. I could have you all executed at this very moment.”

Trance stood his ground and heard the prisoner’s grumbling. “He does not speak for us. We are your prisoners, call and we can be traded, maybe the king will even pay a ransom for us,” said a man from the end of the line of prisoners.

Trance looked at Jerethone who looked back incredulously. He looked up at the captain and silently said a prayer, okay Lord, I am yours, please give me the skill and strength to do what you need me to do. “Your time is up captain, release us or take the consequences.” The captain laughed and made a motion too late.

Instantly Trance grabbed the stake and jerked it straight out of the ground and spun it around and used it as a thrusting spear and drove the hard point into the nearest guard. Immediately the other prisoners rose and clamored as Trance swung the stake and deflected blows from another guard and smote him. He wheeled around and dodged as the archers above were being ordered to take aim and shoot at him. He dodged another volley of arrows and made his way to the sergeant.

The Boulthorian raised his ax, “Finally, I have been waiting for this,” he sneered and brought his ax down only to be blocked by the stake.

Trance blocked blow after blow and pressed after the man. He pivoted and swung the stake and the chain and caught the man a solid blow to the head and as he turned in fury Trance drove the stake through him. Trance withdrew the stake and instantly reached down and picked up the man’s ax and expertly used it to take on a rushing guard with a spiked mace. Instinct and skill took over and he brought the man down and this time reached down and instead of just picking up the man's fallen weapon he tossed it to the nearest prisoner. The prisoner looked at the mace in confusion for only a moment then picked it up and threatened another guard.

Trance moved forward and took the ax and thrust it in the ground by Jerethone and he marched toward the oncoming guards. He swung the stake furiously and he found that the chain also made an efficient weapon. Above the captain was backing up and screaming orders as more guards poured out of the rook, some coming from around the building and others coming down the steps from the deck. So far he had only received a couple cuts, nothing serious yet. Keep going he told himself; this is your only chance.

As he was able during his struggle he continued to make a point of tossing weapons to the prisoners and soon he knew his real plan was taking shape as first one then another and then two or three others took up weapons and then there was a scrambling as men were taking up arms and battling the guards and some were working to pull their stakes out of the ground. A couple men were shot down with arrows from above, but soon some of the other prisoners not only had weapons, some had shields and one had taken up a fallen bow and returned fire from arrows out of a dead guards quiver and arrows stuck in the ground.

Jerethone took a look at the fellow prisoners for only a moment before he took his stake in his hands and with all his strength he pushed and pulled and rocked the stake back and forth till he was able to jerk it out of the ground and he took the ax Trance had thrust in front of him and roared a battle cry and joined the fight. In moments he took another fallen bow and set an arrow to bowstring and took aim.

More prisoners were behind Trance as he made his way to the steps to the deck and he fought his way up. Behind him on the ground more prisoners had pulled up stakes and were either using them as weapons or were picking up fallen weapons. Three men were dead from arrows and had never gotten their stakes out and a few others had fallen after getting freed. The rest were taking more courage as they continued to press against the Boulthorian guards.

Trance reached the deck and the captain was behind his archers as they took aim and he knew he had walked into his death, but something was guiding him and he ducked just in time as the volley of instant death flew in his direction. He leaped up and rushed them, not giving them a chance to either nock another arrow or draw a weapon. The captain had tossed his helm and had his scimitar raised in both hands. Trance took up a fallen archer's sword and with the stake in one hand and the sword in the other he moved forward to meet the captain. The Boulthorian captain proved to be a formidable opponent but Trance had his raw skill and righteous purpose and drove forward, sweeping the man’s deadly blade from him. Ultimately Trance caught him three successful blows and with one final thrust put an end to the captain.

“You chose wrong,” Trance said as he stepped over the man and left him. Then he had a thought and stepped back and looked, sure enough the captain had been in possession of the keys to the prisoner’s manacles. Swiftly he tried them till he found the right key and unlocked his manacle and immediately turned and handed the keys to one of the other prisoners. “Here, unlock everyone.”

“Yes sir,” said the man as he took the keys, unlocked his manacle and proceeded to unlock everyone else that was up on the deck.

Trance quickly found the door to the building and found only a few guards left and they came at him only to find that he was not alone. Many men were behind him and treating him like their captain they took his orders and rushed past him.

While the battle in the ground raged Jerethone made his way to the deck and had his manacle unlocked. With both hands free he took the Boulthorian bow and arrows from fallen archers and started providing covering shots to the fighting prisoners. He nocked an arrow and entered the building and spotted Trance, now I have you he thought. Then a doubt filtered in and he lowered the bow. He made his way forward and followed as Trance led the way to the stairs going down.

“So where are we going,” Jerethone asked as he took up position as a rear guard.

“If I am right we are heading to the armory. I think we are going to find our weapons and armor there,” Trance said as he continued down the stairs.

They arrived in the basement and a few men spread out looking for the armory and in a couple minutes it was found in the far right corner. Trance entered first and found instantly that he was right. He stepped out of the room and directed some of the men in, “Get your armor on and get your weapons,” he directed and stood guard at the door. Jerethone joined him.

“Why don’t you go in and get yours first,” Jerethone said curiously.

“Not till everyone has theirs first, even you,” Trance answered looking him in the eye.

“As you say,” and Jerethone went in and in a few minutes came out in his armor and held his bow at the ready. Trance eyed the magnificent bow and looked Jerethone in the eye again and he knew, not sure how but he knew for a certainty. Jerethone said nothing and headed to the stairs followed by a few others armed and armored.

“Send the rest down here when you get back to them,” Trance commanded in a level voice.

“Yes sir,” Jerethone replied and headed up the stairs.

The prisoners alternated as one or two of them went in at a time and came out in their armor and weapons and headed back up to take on any Boulthorians that were left. So far Trance had not learned how many Boulthorians had occupied this rook. Was there just one division, or were there two or three divisions. He didn’t think there were more than three divisions; the building wasn’t that big. Three more prisoners came down and the first to get to him said, “Sir, we are the last ones that need to get our armor. Also that archer up there said to let you know that it looks like the remaining Boulthorians are fleeing.”

“Excellent. Get your armor and wait right here and I’ll get my armor then find a couple other men to help you get the armor for our fallen men, we are going to take it and them out of here with us. They deserve a proper funeral,” Trance said.

“Yes sir,” they responded and entered the armory.

A few minutes later they came out and stood guard as Trance finally entered the armory and donned his armor and strapped on his sword belt and gathered up his weapons, well most of them, it seemed that his spear wasn’t there. Oh well, he would go without one right now, he could get another one later. Before he left the armory he stopped and looked around and was surprised. He saw a small crossbow rifle and a couple quivers of bolts for it hanging on the wall.

He exited and nodded to the six men that had gathered there to fulfill his orders to get their fallen comrades armor and weapons. Trance left them and headed back up the stairs. As he made his way up he made a decision and went on up to the second floor and looked for the captains quarters.

It didn’t take him long to find the room and as he hoped the captain's comp pad was on his desk. Trance picked it up and tried it. Unfortunately the device was locked. Well I’ll just take it anyway. Curiosity tickled and he swept through the room looking for anything else that would help him. Nothing, okay let’s go. He left the room and headed back to the first floor.

Trance stopped and had an inspiration and called a couple men, “I want you to raid the kitchen and collect as much food you can for us and pass the word to meet me at the stables in ten minutes.”

“Yes sir,” they said and started off only to be stopped momentarily as Trance had a thought and asked them to get a few things to cook with as well as plates and cups.

Trance continued back to the deck, he figured that would give him a better view of what was going on and where the stables were. He was surprised when he came out and how the former prisoners were all in their armor and turned to him as their leader. Nearby Jerethone was looking oddly curious at him. Trance had his serious suspicion of him, but that could wait. He knew they had to leave, however, his conscience bothered him and he hoped they had time for just a couple things to do.

Trance took a long cleansing breath and looked the men over. It looked like there were forty-four of them in total. Of them he noticed that besides Jerethone, there were six archers. He continued to look them over and saw three spearmen and an idea started to fit in place. “Okay, we are going to leave, but there are a couple things we need to do first. So before we leave I want this place secure. Jerethone, for the moment you are my lieutenant and come with me. Now I want you archers to pair up and take one of the spearmen with you and you three patrol that wall, you three patrol that wall, and you three take that wall. If you see anything, send the fastest runner to find me immediately.” He watched as the three trios headed for three of the walls to patrol as Trance now directed two large Golden Griffins to guard the gate in the front of the rook.

As he looked over the remaining men he noticed a shorter Golden Griffin, “What’s your name?” he asked the Golden Griffin.

“Thon sir. I’m a daggerman from the Brass Leopards,” the man said proudly.

“Can you shoot a bow,” Trance asked.

“Not really sir, I’m not a good archer at all and I’m not good with a spear either,” Thon said.

Then Trance remembered what he had seen in the armory and he turned to Jerethone, “Wait here for me and keep everybody vigilant.” Jerethone looked at him surprised as Trance went back in the rook. Just a few minutes later he stepped out on the deck and handed the small crossbow and quivers to Thon. “I’m sure you can use this. Join the two guys guarding the gates.”

Thon took the crossbow and looked it over and decided that he could easily shoot it so he loaded it and put the quivers on his back. He saluted and headed for the gate.

Now Trance headed down the steps from the deck and headed toward the stables. Jerethone and three others followed him like a retinue. He made his way swiftly and soon found what he was hoping to find. There by the stables were two wagons, one of which had a symbol similar to the emblem on the medical wagon. He approached the door and noticed the familiar plate by the door. Shoot, how are we to enter and use it. Then he noticed a keyhole just below the plate and he hoped he was right.

“Hey, who has the keys from unlocking us,” Trance asked.

“I do,” said a large Golden Griffin and he came forward with them. In a way the man reminded Trance of his friend and one of his trainers, Jaymmol.

“Thanks,” Trance said and turned to the lock and went through the keys looking for one that might fit the lock. He didn’t think they would have time to search the dead Boulthorians or the rook. If it weren’t here he’d have to abandon part of his plan. Thank you, he prayed as the next to last key fit and turned. He entered and verified that it was indeed a medical wagon. He stepped back out and raised his voice slightly to be heard. “Does anyone have any medical training?”

There was a small pause then one man responded, “I do. I took a couple of emergency medical classes.”

“Here,” Trance said, handing the key to the medical wagon to him. “I want you to get those six men and help them get the dead and their armor loaded in the medical wagon and then go get the horses for the wagon and get them hitched up along with your horse. Can you drive this thing?”

“Yes sir I can. I might need someone to ride with me, preferably an archer,” the Golden Griffin said.

“Not a problem. How about you get Thon to ride with you. When we are about ready I’ll get him to hitch his horse to the wagon with yours,” Trance said as he quickly moved on to the other wagon which was just a storage wagon. Turning to the men that he had sent to the kitchens, he took the last key and sure enough it was the key to this wagon. “Here use this and load up the food and supplies from the kitchen in here and get it hitched up with its horses, I think that those two there must be the horses for the wagon and that other large pair are for the medical wagon. Then hitch your horses to the wagon and get ready to move out.”

“Yes sir,” they said and immediately went to work.

Then Trance headed back to the rest of the men followed by Jerethone. Here was the last thing he wanted done before they left. “This is going to be hard, but I think this needs to be done. I want half of you to take all of the fallen Boulthorians and lay them out in the dinning hall and cover them with their surcoats. The other half are to provide you cover in case the Boulthorians return with reinforcements before we leave. I know most of you will object, but this is something we must do. Okay get going and please make sure you check all of the grounds as well as the rook, and don’t just go past quickly, double check.” A few men grumbled, but by the way he expressed his order the men went to obey.

“You know that wasn’t necessary,” Jerethone said.

“Yeah I know, and that they would never think of that for us. That is why we are going to do it,” Trance said, knowing in his heart that he was doing the right thing. “When we get to Bengal Castle and after it is defended I will suggest that we contact the Boulthorians to come and collect their dead and leave,” Trance said and headed back to the stable and retrieved Odin. “How are you doing,” he said as he unhitched him.

“I am doing much better now. Those are the most unpleasant horses,” Odin said, surprising Jerethone who had never heard Odin speak before.

“How,” Jerethone began to ask.

“When I refurbished him I found an old robot knight's voice box and installed it. It makes communicating with him a lot faster and easier,” Trance replied without looking at him. He then mounted Odin. As Jerethone stalked over and mounted his own horse, Trance took a private moment and pulled out the Boulthorian captain's comp pad. “Hey, if I hooked this to you could you try to unlock this comp pad and tell me what is on it.”

“I sure can, I have downloaded a number of programs for this eventuality. Nobody usually thinks about using this feature. It may take some time depending on what programming language that it uses,” Odin said more quietly so Jerethone would not hear. Trance took a moment to open a small hatch and looked through the variety of connection cords until he found the right one and he hooked the comp pad to Odin. The horse stood still for a moment and processed while Trance sat in the saddle and surveyed the men following his instructions. Then surprising him Odin spoke and what he said surprised him, “I have unlocked the comp pad and this is very curious, it is an Althorian comp pad and it has part of the communiqué that I told you about. I know more of what they are planning.”

Chapter 28

Bengal Castle

“What,” Trance said, shocked. Had he heard that correctly? If so, where and when had the Boulthorian captain gotten the comp pad?

“Yes,” said the electronic and young knight voice of Odin. “The password was not hard to decrypt, and a lot of information has been deleted from it, however, I was able to recover some of the communiqué. You must know that this communication actually came from Caldora.”

“What, how is that possible,” Trance said. He had a hard time thinking that someone from the capital was assisting the Boulthorians. That would be treason and he instinctively lowered his voice. “Is there any indication of who sent that communiqué?”

“I checked and that information is not there. I checked seven different ways and I cannot find out where the communication came from. However, it does have a couple details that you need to know. It indicates that possibly the assault on Bengal Castle is not what it appears, and the Boulthorians are after something. Part of the document is in a code, and I don’t know what it might be. It just indicates that they are after something important, and that is why they have assembled a large force,” said Odin.

Trance lowered his voice, “Odin, let’s keep this information to ourselves right now.” Then he thought he had to know, “Is there anything else you can tell me before we get going.”

“Yes, there is one thing I can tell you. The Boulthorians are planning to attack Bengal Castle very soon. It may be in just a few days and they are only sending three divisions in the assault,” said Odin.

Once again Trance was surprised, “Only three divisions, that makes no sense. Marlett said it would take at least four divisions to assault it.” Something about this was sounding wrong and he could not figure out how or why. “Okay, let’s talk about it later. We need to get out of here.”

In a moment a couple of Golden Griffins approached him. “Sir, we have completely loaded the kitchen supplies in the wagon and it is ready to go.”

“Thanks. Get the wagon ready to go, we are leaving very soon,” Trance said.

The other Golden Griffin addressed him, “We have our fallen brothers in the medical wagon and we are ready to go.” Again Trance sent them to the wagon and ready to move.

As Trance waited, Jerethone rode up to him on his horse Stalker. “We should get out of here. What are we waiting for?”

“We are waiting for the dead to be properly taken care of, not a moment longer,” Trance said and relaxed in his saddle.

Seven minutes later the bulk of the Golden Griffins were coming out of the rook and heading toward him. The first man to reach him spoke, “We have all of the dead scu, the Boulthorians are laid out in the hall as you ordered. Yes, we checked everywhere three times to ensure we got them all.” He did not mention that a couple of his fellows had spit on them.

“Thank you, I know it was a difficult task. Okay, we need to leave. Go get your horses,” Trance said and waved them to the stable and as the first four Golden Griffins came up on their horses he sent them to get the men he had sent to patrol the perimeter walls. Soon they were all gathered together and Trance gave the order for them to leave.

As they rode out onto the old road Trance asked Odin, “Do you know where we are and how do we get to the road to Bengal Castle.”

“I think I have correctly triangulated our location. This rook is very old and is not on some of my maps, however, I looked in my records and I believe that we are about seven miles from the road we need and I will have our accurate location,” Odin said.

Trance then had an idea and asked, “Can we communicate with Marlett and let him know how we are and find out how far ahead they are?”

“At this moment I cannot communicate with him. There is a jamming barrier over this rook. I have not been able to locate the source. I will let you know the moment we ride past the barrier and can send a communication,” Odin said.

“Okay, then let’s get going,” Trance said and took the lead and the Golden Griffins followed him.

They followed the old road and Trance kept his head on a swivel. All of them had been ambushed and taken prisoner once, he had no intention of them being ambushed again. Due to the winding road Trance set a slower pace so everyone could keep up. A good portion of the Golden Griffins were surprised at Trance’s horse, they all recognized it as an older Muster Type 18B and it probably should have been recycled, however, they did not know all of the updates Trance had done to be able to use him as his warhorse.

Suddenly Odin spoke, “Sir, I was correct on our location and we are just three miles away from the main road to head to Bengal Castle. Surprisingly it seems we are much closer than where we were ambushed.”

“I would say it was an unusual short cut,” Trance commented. “Can we communicate with Major Marlett now.”

“Yes, let me link up,” Odin said and momentarily a shocked and pleased Marlett appeared on the communications and targeting screen in the back of Odin’s neck.

“Trance, how, what happened. We saw you captured during the ambush. Where are you,” Marlett said.

“In short, I led a prison break and I have forty-three Golden Griffins with me,” Trance said. “There are a few from the Brass Leopards, and some from the other two Golden Griffin divisions that were to join us at Bengal Castle. I hope the rest of the Ocelots and Caracals got there. How far behind are we?”

“I have actually talked to the captains and they are indeed there. As you know all of us were ambushed at different places, which cannot be a coincidence. Just so you know we lost a few men in the ambush, among them Captain Telliar, and First Lieutenant Wyn. I am excited that you are alive and on your way. Where are you now.”

Trance consulted the overlay map that Odin brought up for him. “It looks like we were held at a very old rook, the map Odin found called it Farin’s Rook and we are now just a couple miles from the main road.”

“That is bizarre. I know that rook, and I wonder how long they had been there. So you are actually not too far behind us. You are maybe a day and a half behind us. Let me think, you should get to Bashen by the end of the day. Go to the Monarch Hotel to stay the night. I will call them with the transaction account and get it all set up for you and your men. Then tomorrow I will do the same for you till you get to Bengal Castle.”

“Thank you Marlett. I appreciate it. I think we can really use a rest. I will contact you as we get closer to the city and the hotel,” Trance said.

“You are absolutely welcome. I will let everyone know how you are and we can’t wait to see you,” Marlett said.

Within five minutes they were all on the main road and Trance was more relaxed in his saddle when Odin’s communicator came to life and a very concerned face looked at him, “Trance, thank the Lord you’re alive. I have been going crazy not knowing. What happened, they said you were taken prisoner,” said Princess Corena.

“I am fine. I took a lump on the head and was taken prisoner and you might say I caused a prison break. I’m safe now and I’m leading the men I helped escape on the road to Bengal Castle,” Trance replied.

“How did you get hit, are you sure you’re alright getting a lump on your head. You should see a doctor,” she said.

“I’m fine, I took a hit from a mace when we were ambushed and taken to Farin’s Rook. Without going into a lot of detail I broke free and led a prison break like I said and we retook the rook. So we are now headed to Bengal Castle, that’s our duty, we were heading there to start with to defend it,” Trance said trying to explain.

Corena looked relieved and concerned for him at the same time. “You still should get that looked at. I admire that you want to fulfill your duty as a Golden Griffin, that is one of the things I know you have worked for, and something could happen to you there, just do this for me and get your head looked at.”

“Okay, I will go get my head looked at when I get there. Are you okay, have the Boulthorians tried to do anything in your area,” he asked, hoping to distract her.

“Unfortunately nothing has happened anywhere near here. It’s been dull and boring, don’t get me wrong, I was born and raised here and I had always dreamed of serving as a Lady Golden Griffin, even being the captain of my own division. My mother has not always been happy about that, but she has supported me. I would rather be out where you’re at doing something, rather than supervising my Lady Goldins as we patrol the walls and outside area around the outpost,” Corena said.

“Well it’s not been boring here. I’m still not sure how or why I said what I did there at the rook, and I’m not sure if I’m even qualified, but these guys seemed to make me the leader. I figure that will change when we get to the castle and we find out really what we are up against. Something weird I need to tell you, in confidence,” Trance said lowering his voice as he kept riding in the lead down the mountain road. “I found the Boulthorian captains comp pad and it’s Althorian and had a coded communiqué about their plans for assaulting Bengal Castle. This doesn’t make sense, but they are only sending three divisions after Bengal Castle, and Marlett told me that it would take a minimum of four divisions to assault it with any chance to capture it, and they have another force that is looking for something and to assault some other location, I don’t know where.”

“Huh,” Corena said curiously. “There are many artifacts they probably want and several places they would want to attack. And you said the comp pad was from here.”

“Yes, and when I plugged it into Odin he found the communication and discovered that part of the communication was sent from the capital,” Trance said.

“What,” she said, surprised and concerned. “Who would do that? That would be treason. I will let my dad know. For now hold onto that comp pad and when you get back we can take it to someone that can find out who sent that communication.” There was a voice behind her and she turned and then looked back, “I have to go, some kind of meeting. You take care and get to a doctor, remember, I am the princess and I will know if you went or not. Love you,” and she disconnected.

Trance sucked in a breath. “Okay, I have to see a doctor after we get to Bengal Castle.” He shook his head slightly and refocused on the road ahead of him and he patted Odin.

The road wound up and then down as they crossed the mountain and rode past a few little mountain villages. Late in the afternoon Trance was relieved to see the city of Bashen just ahead. Within a few minutes of entering the city he spied the Monarch Hotel and he directed Odin there. Exhaustion was now creeping through his body as he dismounted and removed his helmet and with an act of will he walked into the lobby. There was no trouble, Marlett had been a true man of his word and had called the hotel and arranged for their rooms and dinner. Trance had a hearty meal and found that he had a room for himself and moments after he got out of his armor and sat on the bed for a minute he slumped over and slept.

Trance rose the next morning and looked at his chron and was shocked that he had slept in some. He showered and donned his armor again and went to wake the other Golden Griffins. Even though he knew they should get going he gave them a half hour to eat some breakfast. Trance made sure he ate a good breakfast also. He checked his chron and called his men and they got up and headed for their horses and in minutes they were heading down the road again.

As the day passed Trance could tell that they were on the other side of the mountain down the road he saw the road stretching across some plains again and he started to see the Crown Mountains in the distance. Gradually he picked up the pace and eventually they were racing down the road. It seemed again that some word must have gone out and every time they encountered traffic people moved out of their way. They went to a ride through sandwich restaurant. It was later in the evening when they stopped and as before Marlett had set them up again.

Trance did not get to sleep as early as he wanted after dinner as Marlett and then Corena called him. He rose earlier than the day before and kept to his routine. Forty minutes later he had the Golden Griffins on the road again. He felt more excitement as he started pushing them as fast as he could down the road all the while the Crown Mountains were getting closer and more majestic. When they stopped in the evening he knew that they would arrive at their destination the next day.

The following day towards midday Trance got his first sight of Bengal Castle. It was almost like a fantasy castle with its outer walls and castle building with four guard towers and a tall central spire. On their approach Marlett and the two captains came out to meet them. The only captain not there was the captain of the Brass Leopards. Together they rode past the gate to the castle grounds and then the gate was closed and locked behind them and there waiting to meet them were the captains of the local knights and pawns.

“We are thankful that you escaped and made it,” one of the captains said. “We’re glad for any assistance we can get. As you can tell the Boulthorians have not moved on us yet. So this is it, we are locked in,” he said motioning with his right hand at the gathered knights and pawns that had come out to greet the newcomers.

Trance looked around and was slightly shocked. They would be outnumbered, but not by much now. Then he had a thought, he better do it now before anything happened. What if he didn’t do what the Princess said and he was killed. Well he could only die once. “Major,” he said and saluted, “We are here as called. I just have three things to ask, one, where do you need us to serve, second, can we get something to eat for lunch first, and third,” he leaned forward and lowered his voice, “I have orders from on high,” and he indicated with his hand, “I need to have this lump looked at by a doctor, and right away.”

Marlett laughed before answering and turned quickly to the other captains, “I’ll explain later. Now to your requests, you and the Golden Griffins will divide up and join the defenders on the wall. I know you have your bow, and we can get you a spear later, and join the archers there at that guard tower,” he said pointing to a tower to the right of the gate. “You’ll have plenty of cover and excellent sight on the front of the castle. Jerethone, I want you there also. Now your second issue, yes, Captain Omar will show you to the dinning hall. I want you all in good health when the Boulthorians get here, make sure you get enough to eat. Now your third issue, and I have already been called and talked to, on multiple occasions, and you have an appointment with the local doctor I would say now. I will take you there right now as Captain Omar takes your fellows to the dining hall. Alright let’s get going, the Boulthorians and,” with a wink, “the Princess are waiting.” While Captain Omar called the men off their horses and directed the stable boys to come and get the horses and gather them to stalls and hitching posts, Marlett, chuckling, signaled Trance to follow him to a carriage that would take them to the castles three story hospital clinic and the best doctor.

They were let right in and Trance did not have long to wait for the doctor to get in and examine him. Fortunately he didn’t have a concussion and he was cleared to serve. As they were leaving one of the nurses was giggling, “Mr. Sonderson, I want to verify an order. We will send a copy of your visit to your designated doctor at the capital, and there is a request for your record to go to the palace.”

Trance looked at her confused. Why and who at the palace would want his record of this visit. As he stood there Marlett chuckled and looked away. He frowned even as the nurse’s face reddened and she looked away. Then it was like the mace hitting him again, “Ah yes, thank you, please send my records to my designated doctor, and to the uh, palace.”

Marlett led him out of the building and to the carriage to drive to the main building and from there walked with Trance to the dinning hall. “I’m sure the princess will be happy to see your records.”

The dining hall was almost empty when Trance ate his lunch while Marlett sat a couple chairs from him and was looking at his comp pad. Then as Trance was finishing and took another drink of water the whole division of the Golden Lynx entered the hall. Trance took his plate to the collection spot for the dishwasher and he was surprised that Marlett and Bear were standing waiting for him to return. “What’s going on?” he asked unsure.

“Trance Sonderson, this is very impromptu, but necessary,” and before Trance could say anything Marlett reached over and removed his badge, “As you know we lost our Captain and First Lieutenant. I Major Marlett Torland of the Kingdom of Cator and by the authority by King Maximus Astorene recognize Terrance Scott Sonderson, known as Trance, for his leadership, courage, and courtesy, and for his actions in the field and in extraordinary circumstance promote him to the rank of captain.” Marlett turned and took the box in Bear’s hand and opened it and attached the gold badge to Trance’s surcoat above his heart.

Trance blushed furiously and could hardly breathe. He looked down at the gold badge. “How, I’m not qualified. Are you sure,” he stammered.

“Yes I am very sure and she already knows. I think before you go to the tower, a few of the guys are waiting to escort you there, you need to go to that kytherum over there. I think you have a call,” Marlett said and with a laugh and a signal the division rushed up to congratulate him and then headed off to their stations.

His head felt light as he almost stumbled over to the kytherum communicator screen and as he walked up Corena’s beautiful face was beaming at him. “Trance, I am so proud of you. Wait till I call your folks, unless you want to tell them. I know they will be thrilled. Just so you know I spoke to Kyle just a few minutes ago and he is so excited for you.”

“Thank you, I don’t know what more to say. Yes, could you call my family, I don’t know if I can at the moment, I still need to tell Marlett about what I learned from the communication and I don’t know how much time we have before the Boulthorians decide to come,” Trance said and then he added because he wasn’t sure of himself, “I don’t know if I’m qualified for this. Certainly one of the other Golden Griffins in our division might be more qualified, Hamon for example.”

“Trance, trust me and trust Marlett. I have seen your record and you are very qualified. And so you know, Hamon flat out told Marlett that he would take the First Lieutenant position only if you were promoted to captain. You should be very proud of yourself, I am and I love you very much, remember that. I still have my plans for when you get back to the capital. I know you have to go,” and then she blurted out as a tear streaked her cheek, “I know you’ll be wonderful. Keep safe and come back to me, please.”

Trance felt a hot tear in his right eye and didn’t know if she saw, and maybe it didn’t matter, “I will do my best to serve as captain and bring honor to my promotion and do my very best to serve you and the kingdom. I will do all I can to get back to you. I love you too,” and before the hot wet spilled over he turned around and headed toward his friends, comrades in arms, his division, toward his future.

Chapter 29

Thunder Before Lightning

Gracer and Zam and four of the division archers waited and some of them stifled chuckles as Trance walked up. Then they all walked out and across the grounds to the foot of the tower. Trance wasn’t surprised at the stairs in the tower that seemed to keep going up. There were four floors with different rooms along the way till they reached the top and Trance came out and on the main deck.

Trance walked up to the balustrade and looked out and was impressed by his view. He would have a clear shot if and when the Boulthorians showed up. He turned to look around while the guys dispersed to take their positions and Trance set his shield near the edge like everyone else and took his bow and checked his arrows. As he looked around he noticed that at every station there was a container filled with extra arrows.

“I see you got what you wanted,” Jerethone said sarcastically.

Trance turned and looked at him and growled, “I did not ask for this and I would rather Telliar were here. And as awful the circumstances for this at least it was for my actions unlike your friend that just got his position because of his dad and he thinks he is entitled.”

Jerethone backed up a step like Trance had just threatened him. “As you say,” he said and frowned slightly. More curious, he thought and continued to study the strange young man. Then just to have something to say he said, “That’s an interesting bow, may I,” and he set his bow down.

“Sure,” Trance said and handed him his bow and watched him for anything.

“Interesting, this is a good bow. This is just a touch below a longbow and should have a good range,” Jerethone said, appraising it with an expert eye. He took an arrow and drew it back to check its pull and sighted down inspecting the aim. “Very nice,” and he handed the bow back.

“Thanks,” Trance said and took his bow and then he had a thought, “May I see your bow.”

Jerethone took a moment to answer, “Sure,” and he held out his bow.

Trance examined it. The bow was a deathly dark gray, almost black, and was most definitely a longbow. He wasn’t sure what it was made of and for him it was a hard draw, yet it held well like a compound bow. It had an ergonomic handle and had a slight shelf for the arrow to sit and a small circular sight with crosshairs. Was this the bow, he looked at the handle more closely, it could be. However, he had a puzzling thought, if it was him with this bow, how had he missed him. “This is an excellent bow. It looks really high end,” Trance said casually.

“Thanks,” Jerethone said, taking the bow back and stepping closer to the balustrade and looking out an arrow slit.

Trance pondered what to say next as he flexed his bow and stepped up and looked out also. Gracer was standing off to his right holding his spear lightly and also looking out and Zam was on the other side of Jerethone actually leaning on the balustrade with his spear and looking out. Spaced out in the tower platform were seven more archers and five more spearmen. They all looked anxious and occasionally stepped back to walk around for a moment to stretch and relax. It seemed that everyone was slightly distracted; maybe it was time to act.

Trance leaned forward and looked out at the wall and noticed the men walking along the wall behind its protective balustrade and arrow slits. As casually as he could and in a low voice, “I don’t think you’re a very good hunter, or assassin,” he said as he looked out at the grounds surrounding the castle.

Jerethone stopped and almost comically or stereotypically turned his head. His visor was down and there was a slight glare so Trance could not see his face clearly. “Why would you say that,” he said in a voice just as low.

Trance looked off to the side for a moment and then he lifted his visor and looked Jerethone in the face. Even though he could not see his face clearly he saw his body tense, “You missed me last summer, and I’m sure you tried to get me and my brother at the Markem’s farm. And if I’m not mistaken you used a crossbow at the theatre,” he kept his voice nearly friendly. Gracer looked his way and Trance made a small motion with his hand indicating all was well.

Jerethone merely glanced at Trance’s friend and comrade in the Golden Lynx division. He was tempted but decided to keep his visor down. “Are you accusing me of something? What would make you think I had tried to shoot you? Why would I?”

Trance had a feeling and went with it and after taking another look out looked back and continued in a low casual voice, “I suspect that at one of the tournaments where I was eliminated in an archery joust that the arrow came from your bow. It was you over by your friend, captain Rex, that the arrow came from.” He even gave a small nod and looked out again. This was almost stereotypical. How many movies or shows had he watched scenes like this? But this was real and he was doing his best to keep his emotions in check. The arrow shot at him at the Markems farm could have killed him, okay, try to kill me, but trying to get Sammy also, you better watch out.

Jerethone remained silent for a few moments. “I still don’t under…”

“I think I spoke very clearly,” Trance said, keeping his voice even. He turned and did his best to look relaxed. “You had me twice last summer, once at the theatre, and maybe three times at Farin’s Rook, and who would question you. I’m curious to know why you hesitated. I turned my back to you several times. It would have been easy.” He looked up and shaded his eyes looking at some passing clouds.

Jerethone clenched and released his teeth. “Is there a reason that you would suspect me? Is it that I was a teammate of Rex at school? I don’t have any personal issues with you, as you made it clear at the rook, we have a duty as we are all Golden Griffins.”

“I think you shot that arrow at me at the tournament because of Rex. Anything to make me look bad or loose and I think he still has some sway over things with the backing of his father. I also think you might have been paid for the two arrows and the bolt; I would think they are not happy that you missed. You’re such a master with the bow, how could you miss. I don’t know if you had anything to do with the lances at training.”

For once Jerethone smiled slightly and he stretched also and turned to look at Trance in the face and finally raised his visor, “I heard about that, and lances are not one of my weapons. If I wanted you dead, it would be with an arrow. I still don’t know why you would think I had anything to do with that,” he said and he saw that Trance already knew the truth. How, he could not say.

Trance looked at him evenly, “I still don’t know why you didn’t take your opportunity at the rook. I would have gone down and nobody would know.”

Jerethone worked his jaw and he looked away for a moment and looked back, “I’m not sure why you are accusing me. If I was supposed to shoot you like you’re saying, I could have done it very easily at the rook. How come I didn’t, can you answer me that.”

“I don’t know why you didn’t. I just want you to know that I am certain that you did shoot those arrows and that bolt at me. I don’t know why you missed whether it was intentional or an accident, and was part of your payment for the horse and that bow,” Trance said and noticed Jerethone finally flinched. He lowered his voice further and looked Jerethone in the eye, “Like I said, not a very good assassin.”

Jerethone lowered his voice to match, “How do you know. There might be another chance, and I’ll have my bow aimed at you, what would stop me from shooting you dead.”

“You won’t,” Trance said with conviction.

“I won’t,” Jerethone laughed slightly and looked to make sure that they were not heard.

“I know because you had your chance at the rook. I knew and even made it possible for you and even easy. You failed, I don’t know why. If one day you succeed, at least I will go to the grave with a clear conscience,” Trance said softly and after a moment he straightened up and turned to look out at the sky and he felt lighter than he had in many months.

A few minutes later Gracer leaned his spear against the balustrade and took his cup and made his way to the water dispenser in the center of the platform. Taking a drink he then headed back to his spot when he asked very quietly, “What is going on with Jerethone? Did he try anything when you were held prisoner.”

“No, nothing going on. Everything is fine,” Trance replied just as quietly. Jerethone didn’t look their way and kept his focus in front of him. Trance noticed Zam looked over curious. Trance raised his hand politely, nothing happening.

The day seemed to pass slowly and after a few hours it was best for half the archers to unstring their bows. An hour later they strung their bows and the other half unstrung. Every hour they switched off. At midday at the switch the archers with unstrung bows and half the spearmen were summoned to the dinning hall to eat. There they were encouraged to take a break for an hour. Then on their return the other half went down to eat and take a break. Trance noticed that this was being rotated all the way around the castle.

Afternoon came and went still with not a Boulthorian in sight. Trance yawned as the stars started to appear in the sky. Marlett came up and called everyone to him. “Hup, okay, for those of you that know and more for those that do not know, you are all relieved of duty for the night. There are two divisions that sleep during the day and they will take your place till morning. If you know where your room is, you are dismissed to go, anyone else there is a pawn here with a list and will show you where to find your rooms. Good night men,” he said and they saluted him and he returned it.

Gratefully Trance talked to the pawn and headed off and found that he was sharing a room with Gracer. Once in the room Trance took his armor off and set it and his weapons aside and crashed on his bed, Gracer was already asleep.

The next morning Trance rose and found Gracer still asleep. He did his best not to awaken his friend as he used their restroom and showered and he was half dressed in his armor before Gracer woke up with a start. Trance finished getting ready as Gracer showered and then donned his armor. Together they headed to the dining hall for breakfast. It was as they were halfway to the tower when a siren roared and Trance swung his eyes skyward and there another roar sounded, the roar of the first Boulthorian troop ship appeared and dropped out of sight.

Instantly all of them raced off to where they were stationed yesterday. Trance was panting as he followed a few men into the guard tower and they took the stairs. The few archers and spearmen that had kept watch there through the night were wide awake and were ready at the Balustrade and looking out the arrow slits to watch ten troop ships release their load of pawns and knights. Then just as it was occurring to them of how many men were preparing to assault the castle another pair of troop ships came roaring in and landing as the first troop ships were taking off.

“God help us,” said Zam and he looked at Trance who was standing there with them looking just as stunned. “There’s one division per troop ship, that is six regiments. We are in deep trouble here.”

Trance looked away for a moment and was trying to do the math in his head, however it was Jerethone that walked up and looked at him grimly, “One thousand and one hundred and forty men, I don’t know if we have enough arrows.”

Dear God we need your help, prayed Trance. He had been sure that the communication said they were coming with only three regiments. What happened, he wondered. He looked around at the men he was serving with and they were looking at him. Did Marlett tell them about what he had said; did they blame him for this? He looked out again, then he looked at the men standing with him in the guard tower, “Well they are here, and no matter how many they have, we are Golden Griffins. This is what we made our vows about; we defend the kingdom and planet. Let’s send them away from here, this castle is ours,” and he nocked the first of his arrows and stepped up to the arrow slit in front of him.

All along the wall and in the towers archers nocked arrows and prepared to draw them back. Again Trance did not know where the words came from and though he had not seen it before and did not realize it at the moment, he was the ranking officer in the tower. Carefully he watched the Boulthorians approach, and noticed that the lead division had a power ram with them. Then he noticed they had an assortment of catapults. No matter, he thought as he took a deep breath, “Don’t think about how many of them are out there, think only of shooting at one target at a time,” he said more calmly than he felt. Then with momentary inspiration he looked at Jerethone, “Do you think you can hit the Boulthorian that is at the firing control of that catapult.”

Jerethone looked at him calmly and looked out and down the field mentally calculating distance and angle, “When do you want him down.”

Trance did not hesitate, “Now!”

Jerethone drew his arrow back and took aim and a moment later he let the arrow loose. Trance did his best to track the arrow and then focused on the man and the arrow hit just to the left of him. Before Trance could say another word Jerethone let fly another arrow and a few moments later the man fell and instantly the Boulthorians were racing forward and soon the air was filled with flying death as arrows passed each other in the air, some flying up, and others down from the castle and deadly spiked balls fired from the catapults.

Trance selected a target and sent his own arrows down the field at one Boulthorian after another. There were too many for him to pay attention to whether they went down or not. He kept shooting, drawing arrow after arrow from his quiver. On three occasions he yelled as spiked balls flew in their direction, one of them hit the wall just below the balustrade where he was standing and one landed behind them.

On the left of him Jerethone was in his element and he was as accurate as he had shown at training. It seemed that every Boulthorian unlucky to be sighted by him fell, most of them fatally. As he continued to shoot Trance turned to him a few more times to take aim at the gunners of the catapults as they had gradually been brought up closer.

In just a few more minutes the Boulthorians were now in range of the spearmen as well as the archers. Zam let fly his first spear and took out one of the Boulthorians with the power ram. Gracer saw and was able to send his first spear at another Boulthorian just behind the power ram. They took up another spear and let them fly as the archers continued to fill the air with arrows.

While Trance was focused on the main host working its way closer to the wall and Boulthorians were trying to get the power ram to the gate, he had not seen that the Boulthorians were also bringing up four mobile towers. Trance turned his head in time to see one of the towers coming up to the right of his tower. Before he could say anything several arrows flew from the tower in his direction. “Look out!” he screamed and turned to return fire at the archers in the mobile tower. Quickly he called for the spearmen to form up and defend the archers as they returned arrows at the approaching tower.

As he saw the tower getting closer he fired one arrow after another his mind looked ahead. Those towers will connect with the wall and allow hundreds of Boulthorians in and down the walls. He thought back and remembered what the towers were and suddenly he had a thought. “Everyone hold your position and do what you can to keep them at bay. I need to talk to Marlett,” and he backed up and went to the kyther pad located by the door to the tower.

“Major Marlett,” Trance called and in a moment Marlett was there and responded, “I know you have seen the towers closing in. I have a thought, if I remember how their tower is set up, it’s motorized down below and it just has a staircase all of the way up. So when the towers get to the wall we need to rush in and take the top, they can only send a few men through at a time at the entrance in the top and we can keep them out. Also send the men that are down below ready to defend the castle on the ground and have them get their warhorses and set them up behind the gate and have them ready to use their horse’s crossbow guns.”

Marlett looked at him for a moment and let Trance’s idea process in his mind and a moment later his face lit up. “That would work. I will spread the word. Get your men ready to take the tower near you.”

Trance disconnected and rushed back firing another arrow as he rushed forward to join his group of defenders and stepped past four fallen knights, they would be mourned later. For now he had to get the remaining men ready for his plan. “Here is the plan I gave Marlett and he is going to direct from his location, when that tower gets here we are going to rush it and take that top level. We can bottle it up at the top of the tower's stairs. Then we can take every Boulthorian out as he reaches the top of the tower. And as Jerethone said about our number of arrows, he’s right, however, he did not consider the arrows or bolts in our warhorses, so the defenders down below will have their warhorses and use their crossbows. Get ready, the tower is almost here.”

Trance was out of arrows and as he took a couple arrows from the container he moved toward his shield, which was resting against the balustrade. In moments he set his bow down, took his shield, and drew his sword and arranged his men with the spearmen to take the lead followed by half the archers, the other archers were to shoot at the enemy down below, and everyone else there was to take up their arms.

The tower connected to the wall and immediately two bridges were thrown down and Boulthorian knights started across, some to the wall to take out the Althorian defenders, and the others to take on the defenders in the guard tower. Only they were met with a surprise. Trance’s plan had reached all of the defenders and Althorian knights and Golden Griffins were waiting and pushed them back to the towers and took possession of the top floor of the tower and started eliminating every Boulthorian getting to the top of the stairs.

Down below the power ram had done its job and opened the gate only then the onrushing Boulthorians were met with volleys of arrows and bolts from the robot warhorses and driven back. The Althorians in the castle were still outnumbered and were taking losses, however, the Boulthorians were sacrificing tremendous numbers in their bloodlust. Trance fought in the cramped space to the tower and slew another Boulthorian knight and stepped back to catch his breath and Gracer stepped forward to take on the next Boulthorian.

“Captain Trance,” said a man from the castle’s tower. Trance looked back surprised to be called by his new rank. “Marlett has called for you.”

Trance hurried back over the bridge and back over the balustrade to the tower and across to the kyther pad where Marlett’s anxious face was waiting. “Trance, it seems your idea has been a success. We have control of the Boulthorian assault towers, they are stopped from getting in there; however, the Boulthorians are now focusing their efforts to get in through the gate. We can’t hold them back much longer. How many men can you send to provide support here?”

“I think we can spare maybe a third of the men to come down and back you up. Make the call to the other towers and ask for a third of their men to come down also and have them go get their warhorses and we’ll get ours, that way we can add more fire power to our efforts,” Trance said. Then he turned and called out, “I need a third of you to come with me. We are heading down to provide back up to our forces defending the gate.”

Gracer and Zam immediately turned to join Trance. More men volunteered and Trance called over to the next highest ranking knight, “Lieutenant, take over up here and keep them from coming out of that tower.”

“Yes sir,” he called back and he started directing the remaining men to keep the tower bottled up and some of the archers shooting the last remaining arrows at the invading Boulthorians.

“Wait,” called Jerethone and he rushed up to Trance, “Here you will need these,” he said and to Trance’s surprise his hands were holding a large bundle of arrows. “I took these from some of them,” he said, indicating many dead Boulthorian archers. He had even restocked his own quiver.

Trance turned around fully aware that his neck was exposed to the former teammate of Rex. He wasn’t sure as he felt the arrows slide into his quiver. And then to his surprise Jerethone rushed across the tower and back and handed Trance his bow. “You will need this,” Jerethone said and then waited to follow Trance down.

It took them a few moments to get to ground level and instead of heading right out the door, they turned and went down a hidden hallway built into the wall and made their way to a second door that opened to an open area just yards away from the stables. Trance led the way to the horses and he found Odin. In moments he mounted and waited a couple seconds for the others to get their horses. Then he led the way toward the front and found a good spot for them to provide extra fire to defend the castle gates.

Trance saw the gates busted open from the power ram and Boulthorians slowly making their way in with their shields firmly in front of them. Trance raised his hand and then dropped it in order for his men to open fire on the Boulthorians coming. He took the control stick reins and using Odin’s targeting he fired a burst of bolts from Odin’s rotating crossbow guns and watched several Boulthorians go down. Some of the men with him were taken by surprise, most of them had never seen the rotating crossbows before, and after all they had come from an old large and heavy warhorse Trance had come across when he was updating Odin. Jerethone looked with a nod of approval at the weapons and fired his horse’s hyper fiber bows.

Some of the Boulthorians turned to put up their shields to give them protection from that direction since Trance and his men were on their flank, however, they were now vulnerable from the other side. Trance was pleased that some of the men that had come down from the other towers had noticed and taken their horses to the other side and fired on them from the other flank. Odin fired again and again and the crossbows worked as smoothly and efficiently as they were designed. More Boulthorians went down, some fatally, others seriously wounded and then before they could get out of the way they were hit fatally.

With the added horses and their firepower the Boulthorians gradually stopped their approach and some looked curious and some even fearful. They had been led to believe that they could finally take this strategic castle and make a solid blow to the Althorians, especially the ones from this dratted kingdom that had caused them such frustration over the years and centuries. There were still some that had made it in far enough to engage the first defenders behind the gate. Now they started to look for support and found they were cut off.

Seeing that the Boulthorians were backing up, Trance communicated with the defenders from the front and the opposite flank and he started moving his men forward to hopefully drive the invading Boulthorians out of the castle grounds. He turned Odin and fired another burst all the while he watched the bolt counter going down. Half the bolts were gone already and he didn’t know how long they would last. He moved up another ten feet and fired again and again, more Boulthorians went down and one man fell with a bolt in his heart.

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Back at the Boulthorian forward position near one of their catapults General Bruise was screaming, “What the blazes is going on. There is no way they have that many defenders. We set ambushes for the Golden Griffins that were to provide support for them. This should have been easy to take this time.”

“Lord General, I can’t explain what is going on. I just have the report that somehow the Althorians took the top of the towers and controlled them; we cannot get any men to the top and over the walls. And reports are scattered about what is going on at the gate. They are being mowed down there. One report said that they have hundreds of archers there, they can’t get in very far and they are backing out.”

“What!” roared Bruise, “Send more men up those towers and retake the top, and make your men drive forward through that gate. I want this castle in the next ten minutes.”

“Did you not hear me,” yelled back his second in command, “The Althorians have the towers secure, we can’t get anyone through at the top. And they must have brought in a ton of archers to assist them somehow. Yes we did ambush them, but still most of the Golden Griffins escaped and made it here. We still don’t have a full account of what happened at Farin’s Rook.”

“Then threaten and force them to drive forward up those towers and push through those gates! I don’t care how many archers they have, eventually they will run out of arrows. I want that castle,” Bruise screamed, not just because King Axlor had ordered it, he had been promised this castle for his headquarters.

His second came up in his face and looked him in the eye, he feared his commander and he feared the king more, but he knew this was not going well and they needed to back up and regroup. “We can’t continue this way and sacrifice our men. Have you not paid attention to our numbers; we are down more than a third of our men. We cannot continue at this rate, it won’t be much longer and we will be outnumbered.”

Bruise stormed and ranted and walked off to take a moment to think. He took out his pad and looked furiously at the reports streaming across the screen. At last he stalked back to his second and in a slightly calmer voice asked, “What do you suggest?”

The second took a minute to think and then said, “I hate to say this, but I suggest we back off for now. We may need to call back some of our troop ships and just abandon the towers for now; however, we leave them for later use. I think we should somehow stay in the area, maybe make a temporary base to launch assaults from and get their defenders to come and spread out coming after us and when they are spread thin we launch another assault and take the castle with little resistance.”

Bruise considered and then smiled an evil smile, “I like that, not bad. If we withdraw we might be able to let them reveal themselves and give us a better idea of what their defenses are. Signal the withdrawal and order the troop ships. We may have to return for our dead later.”

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Marlett watched stunned as the Boulthorians backed up and started to head out in droves. A knight nearby came up and told him the Boulthorians were evacuating their towers and seemed to be in full retreat. “Thank God!” He turned and started giving orders for the defenders to clean up. Weapons had to be collected and the wounded and dead needed to be tended to as well as the gates and towers secured. All was busy as it took hours for the castle to be secured and Marlett sheathed his sword and called all of the captains to come with him to give reports to King Maximus.

Chapter 30

Lion’s Roar

It was four days after the main assault on Bengal Castle and everyone was keeping a vigilant watch. Marlett put Trance in charge of the division while he worked with the captains of the castle's knights and pawns to plan strategy and a schedule for the defense of the castle. Trance had already gone out with the division to battle a small group of Boulthorians that were still in the area assaulting homes and farms.

One division of Boulthorians was particularly brutal and there was a rumor that they were under the direction of General Bruise. This could not be confirmed; anytime they were encountered and fought there was no banner in sight. On a few occasions Marlett came out with the division to get out of the castle. “Let them run things for a while.”

The night after the assault, Corena had called Trance concerned and proud. “Are you alright? Dad sent me over the reports on what happened. And I want you to know how proud of you we are.”

“Well you know how we drove them back. I still don’t know why they fell back like they did. I just did my best to serve where Marlett sent me,” Trance had said modestly.

“Are you sure that’s all? Did you not lead the escape from Farin’s Rook, and didn’t you give Marlett the idea about the towers, and it was your idea for the defenders at the gate to use their warhorses and fire their crossbow guns, and didn’t you make the suggestion that the Boulthorian towers be moved away from the castle and used as watch towers” she said with glowing pride.

Trance swallowed and replied, “Well, uh, yes, I did help with the breakout, and I did give Marlett the idea’s, but the other men there had to act and fought hard to drive the Boulthorians back. I just don’t know if that still qualifies me to be promoted.”

“Trance, what you did at the rook and your ideas to defend Bengal Castle are exactly why you got promoted. By how you conduct yourself and how you put your division over yourself are all why you are more than qualified to be a captain. And you may want to call and let your folks know how you are. They are going to be wondering about you,” Corena said.

“All right I will give them a call when we are done talking, but why do you say they will be wondering. I have followed the rules, they don’t know where I am serving at the moment,” Trance said surprised.

“Well, you may not have seen it, but your ideas and the successful defense of Bengal Castle made the news and my father is furious about that. Not at you in the least, or Marlett. He is very happy and relieved about the castle still in our hands, but someone let it slip about the Boulthorians assault and that you gave the ideas that led to it’s defense. Who would know about the assault and even that you were there or that you gave the ideas to Marlett? Whoever did, they broke the law, and that is almost treason. Please be careful, I still have our plans for when you get back to the capital, which should be in a few days according to dad. He is sending another Golden Griffin division and two divisions of knights there to relieve you. Love you and see you soon,” she had said and blew him a kiss.

She disconnected and he made a more difficult call. He tapped in the code and a moment later his mothers face appeared on the kytherum’s screen, “Trance honey, are you alright. We have been so worried about you.”

Trance noticed a tear slide down her cheek and his emotions were threatening. He made himself look calm and said, “I’m okay, maybe just a scratch or two. So everyone is fine.”

“We just can’t believe they tried to capture that castle. Did they really come at you with over a thousand men,” his mother Eileen said almost breathlessly.

He could not lie to her, if the story was already being broadcast in the news they would have some of the details. “Yes they did and we stopped them.”

“They said on the news that you were the reason that they were stopped,” Eileen said.

“I guess you could say that. Like I told Corena I just had a couple ideas I related to Marlett and we executed them. We all fought hard to protect the castle. It’s a rather important location. The Griffins actually land and take off from here and when they come down from their outpost in the Crown Mountains to travel either to the capital or to travel to another kingdom, they come here first.”

“That would be a very important location. How are you doing,” Eileen said trying to think of something pleasant to say as another unbidden tear escaped her eye.

“I’m not sure I deserve it, Marlett promoted me to captain,” and then he felt he had to explain. “I was trying to protect Captain Telliar who was shot with arrows when I was hit and taken prisoner. Then I don’t know what possessed me, but I told the Boulthorians that I was going to escape the next day and release the other prisoners, and I did. I could have just escaped and gotten away, but I couldn’t. I had to do my best to save them. Then here at this castle I had a couple lucky ideas and they just happened to work. I must be second-guessing myself. Maybe I just have to trust my instincts more.”

Eileen listened patiently and took a moment to think, “Trance, it sounds like you are following your instincts and you are doing the right thing. Listen to me; you did what you needed to do to help yourself and the men serving with you. I know you, and you would not intentionally seek to get promoted. What you did earned you that promotion and we are so proud of you. Just keep praying and the Lord will continue to help you. Does that help you?”

Trance had paused and processed what she said in love, “Thanks mom, that helps. I know that the Lord helped me out here. By the way, Corena let me know that there is a possibility that we will head back to the capital soon. I will let you know for sure when I find out. I need to let you go for now, love you.”

Now four days later he was out on patrol with the division. Marlett was with them and was taking the time to continue to train Trance in his new rank as captain. They were riding along one of the roads up into the Crown Mountains and searching both sides of the road. Even though the Boulthorians had retreated from the castle, they were now launching attacks on the local towns and farms. They had just passed one farm burned down and the family missing. What Trance found strange was that it seemed that every attack was further and further away from Bengal Castle.

“Major, I have been wondering if this is some sort of plan by the Boulthorians. Could they be intentionally leading us away from the castle for some reason,” Trance asked.

Marlett stopped his horse and looked around frowning, “I have been wondering the same thing for the last couple days. I am more certain now that the division we are tracking is under the direction of General Bruise.” As he looked around more he said, “This is curious, this area looks familiar, I just can’t remember from where or when.”

“Well if this is the right area, there is supposed to be a very unusual ruin in this area. I remember reading about it and there are some unusual things about it. For instance, as ancient as it is, it has a unique and intricate architecture. There isn’t anything else like it anywhere. Nobody knows who built it or when,” Zak said knowledgeably.

Trance looked around closer. He knew for a fact he had never been here before. Finding a ruin like that would be exciting, but they had a mission. He returned his attention to the division. Off to the right Hamon, Gracer, and half of the division was looking for any sign that the Boulthorians had been in the area, while Mandor, Zam, and the other half were searching the left side of the road. Bear and Zak were keeping watch along the road.

As the division slowly rode up the road carefully searching the roadsides and keeping watch for possible ambushes Trance was getting used to one particular issue that Marlett wanted him to take charge of, or at least learn how it was done. Step by step, as the saying goes, Marlett had walked Trance through how to select new members to the division, and to everyone’s surprise one of the first new members to their division was Jerethone. Trance was confronted by his friends about his decision and he finally said, “You are my friends and division brothers and I highly value your opinions and suggestions. I have thought long and hard about this and I trust him. No, I cannot say why, I just do. If something should ever happen to me due to his action or inaction, then you can take matters in your hands, but at this moment I ask that you trust me and my judgment.”

Jerethone had also been surprised and took a day to decide and with his decision he had to write a letter to his former division. He was not surprised at the near nasty and snide letter he got back. As Marlett and Trance were in charge of the Golden Lynx division they saw Jerethone’s letter and the reply from the supposed captain of the Brass Leopards. Marlett swore several times and nearly sent a response and then took a breath and did not. Trance was stunned at what he read and almost could not believe it. “I will deal with this later. I have a connection and he’ll ultimately have to answer for this,” Marlett said.

One of Trance’s decisions which some of the division thought was odd was that as they went down the road Jerethone provided cover for the division. Jerethone rode Stalker his warhorse slowly and kept an arrow nocked and ready at all times. His head swiveled back and forth and he walked Stalker around in a slow circle every ten to twenty feet closely behind the division. One thing Jerethone knew was that it would take a little while for them to fully trust him, therefore he made sure to follow any orders issued and paid close attention to his surroundings.

“This is not a punishment, hazing, or since you are new to the division,” Trance told him when he gave the order. “It is because I trust you and you are the best archer. Don’t break my trust,” he said and turned to take the lead.

They traveled another mile or so with no signs. Trance took a glance at his chron, it was thirteen seventy, twenty minutes till midday and they had been busy all morning till now searching this area for the Boulthorians. This was frustrating since earlier this morning they had seen a few tracks heading in this direction and then within half an hour the tracks had disappeared. Trance stretched his arms, well if they did not find anything in the next few minutes he would call a halt and have them stop and eat lunch from literally the lunch wagon.

Trance was about to raise his clear visor of his helmet and let Marlett and the division know his thoughts about stopping for a lunch break when he stopped. He tightened his hand on his bow and he reached for an arrow. Jerethone had just looked off to the left and suddenly noticed Trance’s posture looking to the right and raising his bow and drawing his arrow. Instantly Jerethone raised his own bow and drew his arrow ready to shoot. “What’s up?”

Marlett swung his head around to Trance and he looked and saw Jerethone with his bow raised, “Trance what is it. Everyone get ready.”

Trance couldn’t explain either clearly or quickly, it was just his familiar prickle. He hadn’t felt it for a while so the moment he felt that particular feeling he needed to act and act fast to protect his division. “I don’t know exactly, but something isn’t right. Everyone take a defensive…” he didn't finish his sentence. He had to duck as an arrow sliced the air just to the left of him and a moment later over a dozen arrows flew at them just ahead of the Boulthorian division as they rushed out of the forest.

Trance and Jerethone shot their arrows and it would be useless to draw another arrow. Immediately they put their bows in their saddle holders and both drew their swords. Almost instantly Trance was dueling a Boulthorian swordsman on horseback. The man was skilled and was clearly focused on bringing him down. Trance deflected the man’s sword and blocked another blow with his shield. He brought his sword around and fought back and generated a small gap between them and brought his sword up in the assertive position that seemed to confuse the opponent, only for a moment, but that was all Trance needed. He rode in and struck at the man taking the offensive and the Boulthorian was caught off guard and Trance struck a fatal blow.

No sooner had the Boulthorian fell from his horse that another Boulthorian knight closed in on him. All around Trance the air was filled with the sound of clashing weapons. Bear’s ax swung and took out one man after another while Zak used his sword just as efficiently. Trance didn’t have time to marvel as each of his friends used their weapons with courage and skill and more than once one of them followed his example of not only taking on their opponents, they did their best to bring aid to some of the other division members.

Seeing Danien knocked off of his horse and in trouble with a particularly large Boulthorian with an ax, Trance leaped down and charged in taking the man's blow on his shield. Danien escaped back for a moment before confronting another enemy knight. While Danien bravely fought, Trance was driven back by the ax wielding Boulthorian. Trance used his skill and blocked one blow after another. He backed up and kept his defenses fluid and deflected blows with his shield as well as his sword.

“You’ve lost, and that castle will be ours,” the Boulthorian knight growled.

“I haven’t lost yet and that castle is off limits. For that matter you are not welcome in this kingdom,” Trance said as he brought his sword up in his assertive position.

“Then the beasts will have dinner on me,” said the Boulthorian as he moved in and swung his ax with all of his might.

Trance took the blow with his shield and he was driven back. In moments he was further from the road than he liked. The man kept coming and driving him back and neither of them were paying attention to anyone around as well as where they were. If he had time he would have seen that they had just fought and backed into a small clearing and at one side was an ancient ruin. What was pressing was that the Boulthorian swung his ax back and the blow knocked Trance’s shield out of his hand. Very well Trance switched to fighting with both hands on his sword, the man was too strong for him to draw his dagger, the bowie knife with the eagle head on the handle.

Trance was driven back further and suddenly with one more slashing blow his sword was knocked out of his hand and he was facing certain death. Could he get his own ax out and continue on, he didn’t know since the man raised a boot and drove him to the ground. Trance grunted in shock and pain and a glance showed that he was almost against a strange bush. He made one last attempt to get his ax out and had it immediately smashed out of his stinging hands. One last hope, maybe he could reach into the bush and get a loose branch and keep himself alive for another second or two. Now was his time as the Boulthorian tossed his shield and took both of his hands for the deathblow with his ax. Trance thrust his hand in the bush and his fist closed on what felt like a stout branch and he swung it out, CLANG!

The Boulthorian backed up in shock. In Trance’s hand was a sword. He didn’t have time to take a good look at the magnificent weapon and he didn’t think as he rose to his feet and went after the Boulthorian knight. They fought furiously as the Boulthorian was being winded as he had already exerted a great amount of energy already taking on this Golden Griffin.

With renewed energy Trance advanced and was now dictating the fight. Suddenly they were at the other side of the bush and there was a strange rustling behind him and the Boulthorian froze for a moment and if Trance could see the man’s face it would have a mixed look of terror and horror. Trance took advantage of the man’s hesitation and struck fiercely at the man and drove him back a couple steps and then he caught him a serious blow and as the man backed up more Trance drove the sword through him.

Woo, Trance thought as he withdrew the blade and he was going to take a look at the sword when the strange rustling caught his attention again and he turned to face the largest serpent he had ever seen in his life. It was massive and was starting to rise and he knew he was too close to the snake. It would surely strike in an instant and end his life. He had only seen pictures of what was commonly known as the Death Snake. All this passed through his mind in moments and as in some instances it seemed time had slowed and he barely had time to recognize the markings of what resembled a skull on the snake's lethal head. It’s incredibly long forked tongue whipped out and was just feet from him.

His brain was almost frozen with pure terror. At that very moment a hawk flew overhead and circled the sight as Trance acted. He had no conscious thought as he swung the sword and caught the serpent by surprise. The massive snake tried to back up and rise again for the fatal strike, but Trance acted faster than he even knew. He struck the snake again and again; then with both hands on the hilt he finished decapitating the huge serpent. Breathing heavily he backed away from the head as it still tried to bite him and the massive body rolled and could knock him down and then what.

Now well back from the dead serpent he finally had a moment to inspect the sword. It truly was magnificent as well as very old. Something about it was familiar, but he had never seen any sword like it. Amazing that the blade had the look of being triforged like Major Oulan’s dagger and it was curious that the pommel was circular with what looked like a paw print on both sides and the cross guard almost looked like the front legs of a big cat. For some reason he thought it looked like a lion's legs. Down the blade and through its fullers was an etching that could be writing, but he wasn’t sure.

He had to get back to the road and his division. Quickly he searched and recovered his weapons and with a thought he sheathed his own sword and chose to wield this new sword. His shield had taken a lot of abuse and he would have to get it repaired if and when he got back to the castle. Just then he heard horse hooves behind him and he turned and raised the sword only to be pleasantly surprised to see that Odin had come to find him.

“Sir, I am so glad to find you. I was, well for a robot horse, worried for you. I was hoping to find you and I am here to take you back to the division. They need you,” Odin said as Trance approached him as quickly as he could and mounted.

“That would be great, how is the fight going,” Trance said as he took control.

“The fight is nearly even, Marlett is down and very seriously injured. The Boulthorians are trying hard and not giving in. I don’t think they are going to retreat,” Odin answered as he made his way swiftly through the trees.

Trance gradually pushed Odin faster and finally the sound of combat reached him and as he thought about Marlett on the ground maybe dying or already dead and are any of his friends still fighting he came on the scene and roared a battle cry and charged into the battle and four unfortunate Boulthorian knights swiftly went to their graves as Trance swung his sword with lethal skill. He rode up and again took out a knight bearing down on Danien who Trance was pleased to find on his feet. Another Boulthorian was trying to come behind Jerethone and was struck down by the sword Trance found.

Hamon was on the ground and was standing guard over Marlett and was fighting a fierce Boulthorian with a spiked mace. “Hey,” Trance hollered and the Boulthorian looked up only to be taken down by one of Odin’s crossbow cannons. Hamon looked relieved to see his friend and turned to take on another knight with his hammer.

Now the Boulthorians saw they were outnumbered and were falling away and the highest-ranking knight realized they were going to be wiped out. He would have to pay for this action and probably with his life to his superior, but they could not win. That strange Althorian Golden Griffin with that strange sword was leading the way. Very unusual, the strange knight seemed to be in charge. Their information was that Major Marlett was the leader of this division; maybe their information was wrong. No time to think more on this. “We leave, go!”

The Boulthorians were in flight and the Golden Lynx division was taking stock of themselves. Jerethone took a moment and, finding his fallen bow, raised it and sent one final arrow into an unlucky Boulthorian knight. Trance dismounted from Odin and rushed over to Marlett and stooped down with Hamon and Bear. Moments later the rest of the division was gathered there. Trance looked up and it suddenly dawned on him that he was now in charge.

“Gather the dead and wounded and get them in that wagon. We need to get them back to Bengal Castle immediately. Let’s go, we have no time. If you lost any weapons you have a couple minutes to find them and get back on your horses,” Trance commanded.

In only a few minutes they had the dead and seriously wounded including Marlett in the wagon and a couple knights tending to them. Trance took the lead and the division followed him back down the road to Bengal Castle. Overhead the hawk had circled the scene and flew up to the mountains.

Trance hoped that they could get to the castle in time to save most of the injured, especially Marlett. Maybe even someone could tell him about the strange sword. He didn’t think he would ever forget what had happened and would he ever learn about the ruin. Was he really worthy to be the captain of this division? Then he wondered what the Boulthorians were really planning. He could worry about that later. Almost unbidden was a memory that floated to the surface, but it was a fleeting thought. Unknown to him was that the road he was riding down was not only the road to Bengal Castle, but also the road to many answers and more questions.

Chapter 31

Pikes Head

Trance was at his desk in his room in the barracks at Bengal Castle. Since getting back yesterday from the battle on the road in the Crown Mountains he had been very busy. First he went with the wagon to the hospital and made sure the dead and wounded were tended to. Marlett was in bad shape, the wounds were severe enough that he would survive; however, he was probably going to need to retire. There was another possibility; he could get promoted to the king’s War Counsel.

Then Trance had the unpleasant task of sending letters to the families of the fallen Golden Griffins, followed by looking at his list of eligible Golden Griffins to take their place. He consulted one of the other captains since Marlett was in the hospital. Trance even sent for a Golden Griffin to take Marlett’s place.

One positive event was that this morning the reinforcements and replacements arrived and Trance was reading his orders for the Golden Lynx to return to the capital. There was one other positive, or was it like Trance thought, something curious, it seemed the Boulthorians were backing away from trying to take Bengal Castle. As he sat at his desk finishing reading the division's orders he pondered the fact that since the battle there had not been any sightings of the Boulthorians. Where were they now, he wondered, and what are they planning next.

He had spent a good portion of the night visiting with his men in the hospital and then looking at reports from around the kingdom. It was a slight surprise that the Boulthorians did not seem to be as active as they had been. Some captains were relieved of this, however, Trance couldn’t help but feel uneasy. To him this was strange, why get more active and attack and raid in many places and then back away in retreat, it didn’t feel right to him.

Due to the replacements, Trance decided to leave tomorrow for Caldora. With this as the plan, he sent a message for the new division members to ride and meet them at their headquarters at the capital. He was confident that the nine men were excellent Golden Griffins. Occasionally he thought he was not ready to be the captain of the division; then he remembered that Marlett had believed in him and how his division had rallied around him.

The one puzzle he had at the moment was learning about the sword he had found. So far nobody seemed to recognize it and he was advised to keep it. He found the local armorsmith and took the sword to him for examination and to replace the leather wrap around the hilt. The man really examined the sword and was amazed at it, “This was amazingly forged and crafted. I have never seen a blade like it. It has been expertly triforged with quarvalian, telvian, and yorian. I wonder, but no it couldn’t be. Where did you say you found this,” the armor smith said.

“It was in the forest just in the Crown Mountains near some ancient ruin,” Trance told him.

“That sounds familiar, but it can’t be. I have a college at Caldora that might know more. It’s hard to say how old this sword is, it was that well made. If you look at this leather on the hilt you can tell it is very old, but get a closer look and you can also tell that it was very high quality leather and was meticulously taken care of. That adds to the mystery. Huh, I have heard of swords made like this at various times,” the armorsmith held it and gave it a couple well-practiced swings. “It has exceptional balance and for as old as this blade is it is still sharp, not just razor sharp, it has been just as meticulously sharpened and well honed. This will be an honor to wrap this sword for you and it needs a very good wrap. Let me take a look at what I have.” After looking for a few minutes he came back with a frown, then he brightened slightly. “It may cost you a little bit, but I have a friend with a leather shop and I will run down there and see if he has something that would be appropriate. Give me an hour and I should be able to wrap the hilt for you.”

Trance had patiently waited the hour and checked on how much money he had, he hoped this wouldn’t cost him that much, he still had a very important order to make. An hour later the smith was back and had excellent high quality leather. The armor smith took great care to wrap the hilt and then as a bonus he gave the sword a quick polish and admired it before handing it back to Trance. “Do you have a scabbard for it,” he asked and Trance did have a used scabbard that was in excellent shape for it. The smith gave his price, only slightly higher than he usually charged, “It was worth it to examine and wrap this sword. Make sure you take extra care of it.”

Trance thanked him and planned to use the sword if he could and hopefully learn more about it. It wasn’t that he disliked his sword at all, there was just something about this sword that he found, it was like this sword needed to be wielded. One extra issue was that the armorsmith was very able and surprised to repair Trance’s shield. Now all set, he just had a few things to take care of in his room to be ready to leave the next day.

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Some miles away from Bengal Castle sat another castle atop one of the Crown Mountains. It was so skillfully built that it matched its surroundings and was hard to find. Apollis Castle, outpost of the Griffins on Althora. Standing on one of the large balconies overlooking a spectacular view of the surrounding mountain range and the valley below stood three figures. They seemed to be standing and looking at the sky, two hooded figures and one Griffin, in fact the Griffin was Faylor, the Head of Court to the Griffins. While they were looking at the sky a hawk flew up and it would appear that the trio was waiting for it.

The hawk landed on the stone railing of the balcony and looked at Faylor and nodded its head and moved its body and raised and lowered its legs. Faylor paid close attention and clicked his eagle beak and nodded in response. The two hooded figures looked on and waited for Faylor to speak, “Do you understand what he says.”

The slightly taller of the pair spoke from his hood, “Not entirely, please tell us what he has to say.”

Faylor tilted his head and spoke, “He says that we are right. He witnessed the events yesterday, however, there was another in the area so he had to dispose of the dark bird. It was a terrible fight, that is why it took him time to get here.”

“What did he see, are we correct in what the signs say,” asked the other hooded figure.

“He says that he saw a young lion at the ruin and he faced the great serpent and he struck it down and then it roamed out and coming across the conflict, the lion roared and raced out of the forest to bring aid to his friends,” Faylor said.

“So we are certainly correct. Arrangements must be made. We trust that you will see to them. It is not time for us to be known. We have one more stop to make, please give our thanks to the Griffin King and your court for allowing us this visit and a nest for the night,” said the first hooded figure.

“You are most welcome,” Faylor said and he turned and raised his eagle clawed hands to the sky, “This has been a blessed day. May you have a safe journey and find your way. Be blessed ‘Till the Breaking of the Sky.’” Faylor said and lowered his hands as the pair bowed to him and turned and left the balcony. Faylor turned back to the hawk and in his way gave the bird praise and gave him new instructions after which the hawk stretched out his wings and took flight again.

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It was a bright morning as Trance led the Golden Lynx out of the castle grounds and on the road. It felt different to him to be in the lead and set the pace. They left six members still in the hospital, including Marlett who was recovering from surgery to repair his many wounds.

Trance had his original sword in a holder on the saddle and on his sword belt was the old sword that he had found. His bow was in the holder on his back with his quiver and he rode with his shield and carried his spear like a lance. To his pleasure Odin had been moved up to a more prominent position in the stables. As word had spread about them, both Trance and Odin had earned more respect.

One of the leading captains at Bengal Castle had been impressed with him and volunteered to assist him as they contacted the central Golden Griffins headquarters at the palace where the Golden Lynx division actually had their headquarters and barracks. That very day the Royal Bank branch at Bengal Castle issued him a transaction card like the one carried by Marlett.

As Trance rode down the road he remembered getting notices that the families of the wounded would be there tomorrow. The fallen members of the division would be transported to their hometowns to be honorably buried. The families of the fallen had been gracious in their replies to him, as they now had to unfortunately plan funerals. A couple of them actually thanked him for his service and kindness in his letters.

That morning he had even called home to let his family know that he was heading to the capital and should be there in three days. Both his parents had come to the kytherum and talked to him and shared in his sadness at the losses in the division and rejoiced that he was healthy, well he had sustained a few wounds, fortunately just a couple cuts and none deep or serious. They made a plan to come see him the day after he arrived back to give him a day to get in and settled first.

Just then Odin’s communicator buzzed and Trance answered and to his pleasure it was Kyle. “Hey Kyle, how are you doing?”

“I’m fine. I just found out about Marlett, how is he,” Kyle said concerned.

“The last I was told was that he made it through surgery and is recovering. I don’t think he’ll be allowed to report back to combat duty. The Boulthorians did a number on him. If I’d have gotten back sooner it would have been better, but I can’t go back and change that. I’m thankful that I was able to arrive back and help him when I did. I still feel a little guilty about what happened,” Trance said as he continued down the road.

“Trance, you can’t blame yourself when anyone in your division gets wounded or slain. You can’t be there to always defend everyone. You still need to care for yourself, I don’t mean to abandon anyone, it is you have more responsibility now and you are a high-ranking Golden Griffin. I know you, and you are the example for your division, do what you do best and they will follow,” Kyle said reassuring him. “Also my captain can’t wait to meet you, and I’ll see you when you get here.”

“Thanks Kyle, I’m really looking forward to seeing you,” Trance said and they disconnected. He smiled thinking about seeing his older adopted brother. Kyle was proudly and courageously serving as a knight out of the palace there at the capital and had just been promoted to Weapons Sergeant. Trance took it as a blessing that there was no animosity or jealousy between them. Kyle had told him a few times that they were now more than brothers and how honored and proud he was of him and that he bragged that he was the brother of Trance.

The rest of the day passed peacefully even as the division was more on alert as they rode. Jerethone carried his bow and an arrow for most of the day. Bear and Zak had given Trance their advice, as he needed to make a couple promotions and had insisted on maintaining their ranks. “You need stability in the division, we can serve you better in our current positions,” they had insisted.

Trance kept the same routine on the ride to Caldora as Marlett had set. As each day went by uneventfully he could not help thinking that something was wrong. The division seemed to pick up on his thoughts and was more watchful than normal as they rode. At last they were on the familiar road and heading into Caldora and heading for the palace. At the gates Trance and the division were greeted warmly by the pawns in charge.

They stopped and dismounted at the stables and their horses were taken to their hitching stations in a priority area and their wagons were taken care of. Bear took the lead to show Trance to the barracks and in moments a pawn in charge showed him to his room. After a short rest he went to the dinning hall and met the new members of his division and he planned to give them their instructions later that day. Before he even got a plate of food Kyle came up with the knight division he served with, the Telvian Coursers. Kyle embraced Trance and proudly introduced him to Captain Wallean.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you. Kyle has kept us entertained with your exploits and I have read your reports from the field,” Wallean said.

“Thank you, I’m doing my best to learn everything I can. I don’t know if I can fully replace Marlett, but I’ll do my best to serve in his place,” Trance said modestly.

“I don’t think you’ll need to worry about that. From what I have read and heard Marlett made the right decision promoting you. I look forward to working with you here. After you have settled in a couple days I’ll take you for a full tour of the palace and introduce you to the Bronze Guard here,” Wallean said.

“Is Jaymmol still with the Bronze Guard,” Trance said excitedly that he would see him and hopefully Hollen as well.

“Yes, Jaymmol is still stationed here with Hollen Marsh. They are out on a special assignment at the moment but they should be back in a couple days.”

“That’s fantastic. Thank you and I look forward to meeting with you then,” Trance said and invited Wallean and his division to sit with him. The one person Trance really hoped to see was Corena. They had talked the night before and she told him that she would come see him the day after he arrived and she couldn’t wait to get her arms around him.

After lunch Bear and Zak took Trance around the area and the barracks showing him and the other new members of the division around. Before he stopped in his room for a rest a member of the Bronze Guard came by and had him sign for the key to the vault where the Petihariam was stored. Trance found what he thought was a good location to store the key and he kept thinking that Marlett should still have charge of this key. He knew this was one of his most important responsibilities. Before he slept that night he called home and had a very pleasant talk with his family and he looked forward to seeing them the next day. What little did he know.

The morning was bright and sunny and Trance, Hamon, Gracer, Mandor, and Zam all decided after breakfast to take a walk around the palace grounds. Knights, pawns, members of another Golden Griffin division, and some of the Bronze Guard greeted them as they went on their way. One Bronze Guard gave them directions to a wall that had a view where they could look out and see Pikes Head in the distance. Trance eagerly led the way and they were soon looking toward the outpost where Corena was stationed.

They sat down for a few minutes of banter as they discussed their various girlfriends. Most were probably going to come visit in the next few days. Amanda, Hamon’s now fiancée would arrive in two days with both her parents and Hamon’s parents to discuss their wedding plans so far. Mandor, Zam, and Gracer just couldn’t wait to see their girlfriends since they had not seen them in person for several months.

“Corena is supposed to have today and tomorrow off and she said she should be here this afternoon,” Trance said as he did his best to imagine Corena getting ready to leave Pikes Head on her horse Kishara. Then from nowhere he felt his prickle and leaped to his feet. “Oh no. No!” he suddenly yelled. In an instant the other three were on their feet and they looked in horror as they could just make out eight Boulthorian troop ships descending on Pikes Head. Trance felt his jaw drop and for a moment he was motionless and felt helpless. He knew there wasn’t a straight road to get there.

“How can they attack that outpost? There isn’t anything important there,” Gracer said and then he caught Trance’s look and suddenly the impact of his words hit him like a bolt from Odin. “No, Trance they couldn’t know; how could they. It’s not possible that they are there for that.”

“They’re going to need help,” Hamon said. “Do they have enough men and ladies to hold them off?”

Trance had never felt this way before, he felt helpless and lost and then another part of his brain roared and he turned and started off as fast as he could with the others following. “Get your armor and meet me at the stables. If you see anyone in our division, pass the word.” Then he remembered that he had been given a new comp pad with a kyther function and he took it out and called up Bear, “Bear, I don’t know if you heard yet…”

“I know already and Zak and I are alerting the Bronze Guard and our division. The Telvian Coursers will also join us at the stables. I just got done talking to King Maximus, he was looking for you anyway and he knew I would find you. He has given you full command for us to run and you probably know.”

“Thanks Bear. We will see you in a few minutes and I pray we can get there before, well let’s race there and make that outpost safe,” Trance said and headed for the barracks and his room.

As quickly as he could he donned his armor, he didn’t skip a step in his haste and he took his weapons. Swiftly he left his room and in moments he was being followed by the rest of the division down the hall and out to the stables. Moments later the Golden Lynx division was followed by the Telvian Coursers and a third of the Bronze Guard. The remaining Bronze Guard and three pawn divisions took up places securing the royal family and the dignitaries that were at the palace and in the city the sheriffs, local militia, along with pawns and knights secured the city.

For once Trance accessed the mapping function on Odin to direct him down the road. He hadn’t ever gone to Pikes Head and wanted to make sure he was leading them along the fastest route there. He remembered that there was one primary route, and that was the fastest. Steadily he pushed Odin faster down the road and prayed they were not late getting there. Let them hold out till we arrive.

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Corena was smiling and humming slightly as she was dressed casually. She didn’t need an overnight bag, she still had most of her belongings and clothes at the palace; she could get what she needed from there. She had on a bright blue blouse and comfortable blue gray pants. As relaxed and excited as she was to be going to the palace to see Trance, she had a small thought that seemed to nag her. When they had talked Trance had brought up his feeling that there was something odd about the Boulthorians seeming to pull back all of a sudden. She knew this was true; they weren’t attacking all over like they had been, but why.

Since she was just going down the road to the palace she was just going with a small escort, she was the royal princess, she didn’t even think she needed her armor. As a precaution she decided at the last minute to take her sword and bow with a regular quiver of arrows. That should satisfy anyone to question her. Her armor and other weapons could wait for her. She fastened her sword belt and had her bow and quiver on her back and just stepped out her door when the alarms went off.

She looked both ways down her hall and in moments, men and women in armor and arms went rushing past her. “Princess you should get back in your room,” said one male knight heading out.

“What is going on,” Corena demanded as more knights and pawns raced out to see what was happening. She stopped one of her ladies in her division and asked her.

“The Boulthorians, they are attacking the outpost. They flew in from nowhere and they are landing and blocking the road to us, we’re under siege,” the young lady Golden Griffin said. Corena spotted a tear slide down her face before she lowered her clear visor and went off to her station to help defend their outpost.

No! Corena screamed in her head. This was supposed to be a great day, I was to see Trance and take him for the day. Then she thought about what Trance had said, that he thought they were planning something else and were out to capture something. What could they want to take from here; there were no artifacts or treasures stored here. Then suddenly a nightmarish thought crossed her mind. But no, they couldn’t know. How could they know and how could they think they would get away with it? If it was what she now dreaded it would be the worst thing the Boulthorians had done in years and could lead to, she dreaded the thought.

Her mind whirred with these thoughts as she stood there and then with determination she had to see what was going on. She took her bow and strung it and nocked an arrow and started off. She knew the outpost very well and headed for the nearest tower and swiftly overtook some of the archers on their way up. She ignored them as she flew up to the tower and at the platform went to the nearest arrow slit and looked out at four regiments of Boulthorians heading her way. This made no sense. They couldn’t think of capturing this outpost with seven hundred and sixty men.

She watched them as they set up and came forward. They didn’t have any catapults or assault towers. The Boulthorian archers came up and set up in two lines and started firing at the Althorian defenders at the four guard towers and along the front wall. The bulk of the Boulthorians forces marched forward behind a power ram, the device was similar to the ram used at Bengal Castle. It was on wheels and had a sharp wedge on a stout pipe that would be pushed forward by a hydraulic press.

Suddenly she had a thought and rushed to the kyther pad by the door and called up Captain Arnell. “Captain Arnell, get all of our knights and Golden Griffins on the ground to get their horses and bring them up to protect the Gate.”

Arnell looked at her and said, “I don’t take orders from you. We will not do anything like that. Where would you get that idea?”

“That idea was done successfully by Captain Trance in the defense of Bengal Castle just days ago. Didn’t you read the report,” she said, starting to feel angry.

“What report,” Arnell said snidely, “I saw no report and if anyone came up with that strategy it would have been Major Marlett, he was there at Bengal Castle.”

“I know you read the report because I saw it,” Corena shot back hotly, “And you know Trance was made captain. Now do what I am suggesting to help us out.”

“Who are you to give me orders? You only got your position because you are the princess. I had to work my way up. We will not take that stupid action. Stay at your post to aid in the defense of the outpost or return to your quarters.”

“How dare you,” she hissed, “I got this position because of my skill and talents, and as for you working your way up, you fraternized with General Gerrant Absolethane and he promoted you from corporal to captain. Don’t you dare deny that, now do as I say and…” she didn’t get a chance to finish her statement. Arnell disconnected. What is going on?

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In his office Arnell hummed softly and admired the open box on his desk that was filled with currents, the domino sized gold and silver bars gleamed. At that moment there was a knock on his door, “Enter,” he said quite casually for what was taking place outside the walls.

A Golden Griffin entered out of breath, “The Boulthorians are heading to the gate with a power ram. We are trying to stop them, what more should we do.”

Arnell stepped up from his desk and shut the door behind the man. “Let them in,” he said.

“What, just let them in. That’s mad, they’ll take over the outpost and probably slay us all,” the man said, confused.

“I don’t think that is entirely what they want. They just want to come in and take what they want and go, so let them by and don’t say anything about this,” Arnell commanded.

“Sir, that is crazy. What could they want? We have to stop them, we have to protect…”

“No we don’t, let them through and get what they came for, actually what they paid for.”

“What?” he asked and at that moment Arnell put his hand on the man’s mouth and thrust a dark dagger into him. The man struggled and watched in horror as Arnell reached back and picked up a Boulthorian arrow that was sitting on his desk and raised it up and thrust it in the man’s throat. In moments his struggles came to an end. Arnell held him up for a few moments longer and let him fall. Now he would wait for the signal at his door.

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Corena tried unsuccessfully to call the other towers and knew something was really up. Arnell was pompous, but this. She turned and raced to the arrow slit and drew her arrow back and let it fly. It struck one of the Boulthorians with the power ram. “Aim for the ram,” she ordered and immediately the archers with her focused on stopping the ram. She kept shooting at the Boulthorians as one went down and another took his place with the ram. Her mind kept spinning as she tried to figure out what was going on and she watched in frustration as the archers along the wall and the other towers were just shooting with no particular plan. Not that they were not doing their best to defend the outpost, but what good was it doing if the ram hit the gate.

In only minutes she was out of arrows and started taking arrows from the nearest container. A quick look around and she instantly knew they were running out of arrows and then she felt rather than saw the ram hit the gate and as she fired down another three arrows the gate was smashed open and the Boulthorians came rushing in.

Leaving her spot she went to the other side and looked down on the outpost grounds and watched the Boulthorians race in and they engaged the outpost defenders in combat and the sound of clashing weapons filled the air. Then she saw something she did not expect, a group of Boulthorians went into the main building and were there only a few minutes and then they came out and headed directly for her tower. Now for certain she knew. “Half of you take positions and guard that door,” she commanded and drew her sword.

Armored boots rang as everyone in the tower now looked to the door and waited. Suddenly the door burst open and several Boulthorian knights stormed in with raised weapons. Only a few arrows flew, and then before more weapons could be drawn, nearly a fourth of them were cut down. Corena battled savagely and with great skill as she kept them away for a few minutes. Five Boulthorians fell to her sword before the numbers were too great and one of the Boulthorians hit her down and before she could respond one of them approached and shackled her hands behind her and ordered them to take her and leave.

She was put on her feet and marched between two of them as they left the tower littered with the fallen and away from the coppery scent of blood. Uselessly she struggled as they half marched and half carried her to a waiting caged wagon and she was nearly tossed inside and they mounted up their horses and the commander was ordering the retreat. At that moment as a couple troop ships were approaching there was another sound and seven hawk shaped fighters roared above and fired explosive headed arrows at the troop ships.

“Let King Axlor know we have her and that we will be riding to meet him at our outpost,” the huge Boulthorian commander said to his second and moments later they were riding down the road for a couple miles and then pulled off a hidden side road. Nearly three fourths of them made it here as the remaining fourth was providing cover. That fourth never made it to the road as they began to pull back; they were suddenly surprised as Trance and the Golden Griffins and knights ran up on them with their horse’s crossbow cannons spitting out flights of deadly bolts.

Nothing of the scene made sense as Trance rode Odin straight in the Boulthorians and Odin’s crossbows mowed a path for him. There had to be more Boulthorians than this. Where had the bulk of their host gone? Where was Corena? He searched and scanned the towers and the wall. As defenders of the outpost came out to join the Golden Griffins and knights that came to aid them and dispatched or captured the remaining Boulthorians, Trance made his way to the outpost. He consulted several of the captains and learned that their communications had somehow been cut off and they had no idea why and they were just as confused by the assault.

“We also haven’t seen Captain Arnell,” one knight said.

“The last I knew he was in his room getting in his armor,” a pawn said as he went to see what more he could do to help.

What a mess; Trance thought as he continued walking into the main building. Minutes later he was more confused as he looked in Arnell’s door and found his corpse with a spear through him and another Golden Griffin laying against the wall with a Boulthorian dagger in him as well as a Boulthorian arrow in his throat, he didn’t notice the spot where a box had sat on the desk. As he stepped out of the room a knight came up and said, “Sir, she’s gone.”

Chapter 32

War Counsel

“What do you mean she’s gone,” Trance said almost in a panic. Did he really want to know the answer to his question? He didn’t know if his heart could handle the answer. In the back of his head he said, show what kind of man you are. “What do you mean that she is gone?” this time he asked with a firm voice.

“Sir, there were a couple survivors on the near right hand tower that saw the Boulthorians capture her. According to what they said before they were taken to the medical center she really put up a fight and slew seven or eight of them before the numbers were too great,” the knight said.

Whew, Trance blew a breath. At least she was alive, or at least she was. Then he had a chilling thought. They captured her; if they wanted her dead they would have just done it there on the tower. Then he remembered what Odin said was on the communiqué. The Boulthorians had another plan and wanted something. Was this the plan and they wanted to capture her? Why and for what purpose. “All right let’s get this outpost secured and we need to find out where the Boulthorians are and where they are taking her.”

At that moment Zak came up to him, “I can at least answer part of what you need to know. One of the pilots of the Storm Hawks has reported that they took out all of the Boulthorian troop ships and he followed the Boulthorians as they went riding away. They took a little known side road. Going that way will take them roughly four hours to get to their outpost.”

“Okay, if we leave now we might have a chance to catch up to them,” Trance said and was about to head back for Odin when Zak stopped him.

“Not yet. I also got a message for you. We are summoned back to the palace immediately and you are summoned to the War Counsel, by King Maximus himself,” Zak said.

Trance left the building and quickly consulted the division captains of Pikes Head and left instructions that Kishara was to be protected and have extra care. One of his Golden Griffins brought him Corena’s sword belt and her bow. He took them with him as he headed for Odin and in minutes his division, the Telvian Coursers, and the Bronze Guard that came with him were mounted and ready to go. Trance frowned and looked at his chron and shook his head and sped out of Pikes Head leaving the clean up to the divisions that called it home.

While riding the winding road leading back to the palace Trance kept wondering if there was anything he could have done differently. After several minutes of second-guessing he finally had to admit that there wasn’t anything that he could have done different. He couldn’t have ridden there any faster due to the winding road leading up there. If only we had a troop ship that could have got us there, but that was not available. Then two thoughts burst on him. Could they have time for what these thoughts indicated? He didn’t know but he had to try.

A few minutes later they arrived back at the palace and this time as they arrived on the palace grounds Trance leapt down and turned to everyone still mounted, “No one goes to the stable, unless your horse needs to be charged up. All of you stay here, hopefully I won’t be long, and I’ll explain in a few minutes.” There at the palace steps two Bronze Guard came down to meet him and escort him in.

They took him down several halls and past just as many rooms. Trance was focused on following the two guards to pay attention to the rooms he was passing and the paintings and tapestries on the walls. If he had paid more attention he certainly would have stopped to inspect one picture of a knight, or was it a Golden Griffin, wielding a particular sword in the midst of a strange battle. He was led up a set of stairs near the center of the palace and down two more halls to a set of double doors and one of the guards went up to it and knocked.

The door opened and another Bronze Guard greeted them and escorted Trance to the spacious room occupied by a large oval table with King Maximus at the head and surrounded by a variety of men and women dressed impeccably. With a guess he thought they were Lords and Ladies from the kingdom's senate, and Lauretts from the kingdom's house of representatives. Sitting by them were a couple others he didn’t recognize and some of the kingdom's highest-ranking generals and colonels of all of the various military divisions in their dress uniforms.

As Trance stood there he noticed a few people seemed to mutter and he was looked at very curiously. He was about to ask a question when King Maximus stood and indicated for him to sit in an empty seat that was four away from him on his right and then just before Trance sat Maximus spoke, “I have called this emergency War Counsel meeting and invited Captain Trance Sonderson here because we have a critical issue at hand. As most of you may know Captain Trance is my daughter’s intended, so it is crucial he is here because that is the issue at hand,” he said and indicated for Trance to sit.

Then as Maximus sat a rather formal looking advisor from the left of Maximus spoke, “This young man may be the princess’s boyfriend or whatever, he is still just a captain and this is the War Counsel, why is he here? This meeting does not concern him, well in a way I guess it does.”

Maximus turned to the man with a look of displeasure and then addressed the assembled; “We have little time so I will address a couple issues right now. By my hand and royal seal I have removed General Gerrant Absolethane from this counsel, he can continue to serve from Fort Vitellan over the Brass Leopards until his retirement. He is no longer a member of this counsel; in his place will be Major Marlett Torland. Yes, I know he is still in the hospital at Bengal Castle recovering from his wounds he suffered in the service of his duties to the kingdom.”

At that moment as on cue, as Trance saw it, there was a knock on the door. Maximus signaled the Bronze Guard that it was okay for him to answer and a moment an aide spoke, “My apologies sire, there is a call for Lord Oylendewdrum.” At that Maximus gave his permission for the Oylendewdrum to leave. The formal looking advisor that had spoken against Trance stood and left the room with the aid.

The moment the door was closed again Maximus spoke, “Now what I am going to say now is most important and I am holding all of you to Sacred Secrecy, this matter does not leave this room. Is this understood?” Everyone in turn nodded acknowledgement and took their right hand in a motion from their lips to their heart, Trance followed the motion recognizing it as a sign of promised secrecy. “Now one of the reasons Captain Trance is here is that due to the special nature of the Golden Lynx division as it can be sent anywhere in defense of the kingdom and planet. Any member of that division no matter what their rank is in actuality three levels higher, so in this case, Trance is a colonel, the same as you,” he said indicating the colonels further down the table.

Trance looked around the room and saw some shock and surprise. A few mumbled, but most nodded and even a few smiled at Trance. Oh boy, this must be a big issue. I wonder what is to come next.

“So Marlett would be a General,” said one of the Lords at the table.

“That is correct,” Maximus spoke. “Unfortunately, Marlett will be retired from active combat duty, however, he will be promoted to Brighton and have a permanent position on this counsel.” Everyone seemed to agree and more than a few clapped a moment or two. “With that out of the way we have to get to the issue of this meeting. My daughter, Princess Corena was just captured at Pikes Head Rook. The Boulthorians have contacted us and are claiming that Corena has agreed to go with them to Boulthora.”

Everyone was shocked and shook their heads. “What can we do? How can they say she has agreed to go voluntarily with them,” one of the Ladies said.

Maximus looked around at them quietly, “We need to decide right now how we are going to respond to this. Does anyone here have a suggestion; don’t fear to speak up, time is of utter importance.”

“I don’t know about the rest of you, but I say we put together as many knights and Golden Griffins as we can gather within the hour, uh, maybe the next hour and a half, and rescue her,” Trance said finally voicing one of the ideas boiling in his head.

“Do you know what that means? I don’t know if we can get to her either on the road or at their outpost in time for a rescue. They could have her there and possibly off planet before we get there,” said one of the Golden Griffin generals.

Before anyone could continue to speak, Maximus raised his hand for silence and signaled Trance to continue. “I know exactly what that means. Don’t you know what their actions mean?” he directed back.

“A rescue mission successful or not could be considered an act of war on our part,” the general said.

“Wrong,” replied Trance to everyone’s surprise. He looked at their faces in turn and continued with what he had been thinking. “By our own military laws, their action of capturing and taking the princess they have already declared war on us.” Again the king called for silence and allowed Trance to continue. “This is what I suggest, we accept no response to any communications from the Boulthorians. Also we set up a temporary blockade over their outpost immediately, that way they cannot take off. By the route they were taking it would take them four hours to get there; that was almost two hours ago. So we have a very narrow opportunity, as I said to start with, we gather as many Golden Griffins and knights as we can and a power ram and a couple siege machines and head after them now. My division and the knights that rode with me are ready right now. Then as soon as we signal that we have her we release a statement saying that the Boulthorians have declared war on us and we have responded and then we release all of the details out to the news. Until then we make no comment anywhere,” Trance said boldly.

Instantly there was an uproar and several generals and colonels started to argue, “This instance is not what that law means or was meant for.”

“You are wrong, this is exactly the very example of this law. I have a question for you,” Trance said and looked at everyone at the table, “Do we or do we not follow the law.”

“What an impertinent question,” one of the colonels said. “This isn’t about following the law or not. That was not the intent of that law or military rule.”

Trance looked the man in the eye and replied, “I say again you are wrong about that. This is exactly why that law was written. So sir, do we follow the law or not, we don’t have time to debate this and this is a very straightforward question. I ask all of you, this counsel is not above the law, and I certainly am not. I want; no I demand an answer. We don’t have time for this.”

Before the colonel could reply Maximus signaled for silence, “I think I can speak for everyone and say that no one is above the law, especially me. I can say that following the law is one of the best things about this kingdom. So if we are to follow the law, then I say we follow this man’s suggestion. Of course by rule I cannot take action, someone has to make the motion and then it needs a second. Like Captain Trance said we don’t have a lot of time.”

There was a knock on the door, Maximus had a curious look, was it animosity, and he ignored it. He looked around the table and everyone sat silent thinking for a few minutes. Trance was starting to get impatient, when he got a small motion by Maximus, and he sat back and waited. Several seconds passed before one of the Lords spoke up, “What this young man has said has made a lot of sense. For quite a while we have endured the Boulthorians and their raids and they have gotten worse. They have burned down businesses and farms, as well as murdered many of our citizens and stolen crops and animals. When do we consider this a serious problem? I will make the motion that we go with Captain Trance’s plan.”

One of the Lauretts leaned forward and considered what to say and finally voiced her opinion, “As much as I despise the thought of war, what the Boulthorians have done is just like what the captain said. My state has suffered heavily from Boulthorian raids and it seems that everything they have been doing is almost declaring war and I have read that law that he is referring to. This is exactly the circumstance for that law. I will second the motion.”

Maximus was pleased and addressed the table, “This suggestion has now been motioned and seconded, is there any further discussion,” and his look around clearly said that no further discussion was needed. “I call for your vote, please vote now.” At that everyone took their comp pads and pressed their voting functions. Maximus took his comp pad and voted also, and a moment later the result was in. “I have our result, it is not unanimous, however, there is a vast majority and the majority rules. We will take Captain Trance’s suggestion, all of it. We have a couple more issues to discuss. Everyone this issue is for us,” he said as he looked toward the door where there was another knock, again it was ignored.

Maximus then turned to Trance, “Since you and your division and the Telvian Coursers are ready to go you may take them and head on your way. I will get as many knight divisions and a Golden Griffin division or two to meet you on the road. I think there may be a couple siege machines here with their crews ready to follow you; I will give them the order to follow as well. This was your idea, and as you have a most personal reason to take this mission I am putting you in charge. As you said, we don’t have much time,” and he indicated that Trance could get up and leave and as Trance did so Maximus added one last comment, “May the Lord be with you, and bring her back, and thank you.”

Trance stood and saluted Maximus and the War Counsel and strode to the door not sure if he was excited, nervous, or scared. As he turned away he did not see that a few of the War Counsel watched him and then did double takes as they noticed the sword in his scabbard and he did not hear a few questions. Trance was polite as the door opened and he nodded at Lord Oylendewdrum and proceeded to follow a Bronze Guard back to his waiting men. Strange though, as he strode down the hall to the first corner, he seemed to feel Oylendewdrum watch him go and the thought wasn’t pleasant. In fact as he thought about it, the look in the man’s eyes was malevolent toward him. Why, he had no idea. As far as he knew he had never seen or met the man before. One other odd thing crossed his brain as they went around the corner and down another hall; he had noticed a very small red spot on Oylendewdrum’s violet vest under his dark blue dress coat.

Why did that bother him? He didn’t know exactly. The part of his brain that loved mysteries made him curious. Did he have time to ask this Bronze Guard and would he give him any information? Maybe there was something that might get the guard talking, “I hope Jaymmol and Hollen have a successful mission and get back soon.” Trance said casually.

The Bronze Guard turned to him pleasantly surprised, “I hope so too. Just between us, I know you are close to the royal family; I hear things so I think I can trust your confidence. We could really use them, they left our Warrant Officer in charge.”

Trance looked at him curious and asked, “Not that it’s my business, I was curious if you knew what they were doing. What could be important for them to be away from the palace right now.”

The Bronze Guard actually looked around to make sure they were not heard and he continued to lead the way to the front. “As long as it is just between us, they got sent with our Second Lieu, and a corporal to go investigate something for the king. I don’t know what it is, but they left shortly before the assault on Bengal Castle.”

Trance was surprised. What could they be investigating? Then he thought and he restrained saying anything. Was it possible it was from his conversation with Corena? He would have to find out later. Now since the man was talking he decided to satisfy his other thoughts and he didn’t have much time. “Oh. I hope they find out what they need for the king quickly. Hey, uh, do you know much about that Lord?”

The Guard turned to him and replied easily, “You mean Lord Oylendewdrum, he’s all right, a little pompous, after all he is related to the king.” He looked at Trance slightly curious, “I’m surprised you don’t know anything about him. He’s not only a Lord, but is also a Minister to the Kingdom. His duty is to go and observe various places around the kingdom and come back and report. Actually he got here maybe fifteen minutes before you and your division arrived. Just curious that he almost seemed out of breath, well maybe that was due to the important nature of the meeting. I would have thought you had either seen or met him, he was sent to the Forge and Grindstone.”

That revelation stunned Trance, “What, he was there when I was training? Well if he was there to observe, it was probably to keep track of Corena’s progress.”

“Probably, I would think so. However, I’m not sure how you would miss him as sharp as he dresses. Personally I think he dresses beyond his status,” the guard said confidentially.

“What makes you say that? Is it possible he dresses that way because as you said he’s related to the king,” Trance said just as confidentially.

“Well he sort of is related. He is married to the queen’s cousin, or is it her second cousin. Anyway, he always seems to dress better than most of the dignitaries that come to the palace. I guess polished would be the way to describe him, sharp and well put together, just spotless,” the Bronze Guard said and making Trance more curious, at least it gave him something to ponder later. At the moment they were making the last turn to the hall leading to the main doors to the palace.

The Guard escorted Trance out and finally said, “Good luck. I hope your mission is successful. I will pray for you all and I hope to see you again soon. By the way, I will let Jaymmol and Hollen know you were here and asked about them. Take care, ‘Till the Breaking.’” He stepped back and saluted Trance before returning to his post.

Trance returned the salute as multiple thoughts criss crossed in his mind. At the moment he had to focus on the mission at hand, he would have to wait to find out about what Jaymmol and Hollen were investigating later as well as possibly learn more about Lord Oylendewdrum, and if he was always polished, what was that spot. Oh well, that would have to wait. He turned his attention to his division and the knights, some of them had dismounted to stretch while they waited for him.

“Listen up, we don’t have time,” Trance called, getting everyone’s attention. “We are going to rescue Corena. I know we just got here and we’ve had a busy day, securing Pikes Head and then racing to get back here and if you’re like me you might want a rest. So everyone take a few minutes to stretch, head to the rest areas and get something to drink or munch out of your packs. I want you all ready to ride in the next ten minutes and if there is anyone that is exhausted enough and chooses to stay behind to recover, you can do so now. There is no dishonor if you choose to stay and rest and recover.” He paused to let everyone make up his mind, then as everyone stayed put he relaxed and continued. “This is the plan, we are going to leave and head for the Boulthorian outpost. King Maximus is arranging for three siege machines here to go with us. At this moment, hopefully, he is also arranging for an aerial and space blockade to keep the Boulthorians from taking off from their outpost or anywhere near. Our fighters are keeping their troop ships away from them also. Now to give us extra help, King Maximus is going to get a few extra knight divisions and hopefully a couple Golden Griffin divisions to ride out and meet us along our route.” Should he mention the rest of the plan to them or not. He decided to wait, that was enough for now, they would find out soon anyway. Please God help us in this quest.

“You heard him,” called Bear in a commanding voice, “We have just a few minutes to stretch and relieve ourselves. Get to it; we have miles to go and very little time. Move it.” He winked and nodded to his captain as several men dismounted and raced to the nearest rest areas.

Zak came up and voiced a question quietly, “Just curious, who is in command of this mission.”

Trance smiled modestly and raised his shoulders, “I guess since this happened to be my idea, and you know, with Corena and me, I am.”

“Wow!” said Zak and Hamon who had approached to find out more.

Trance stood there and did his best to relax and looked at his closest friends and his division. He had never dared think that he would one day lead such a mission and command so many men. Yes he had thought about being a division captain someday, but not this and never a mission like this, having to race to rescue the princess. In his youth this had been the romantic ideal, but this reality was frightening. What if they failed, he failed. No time to think about that now, let’s get them this chance to take a small break before we head out. As he stood there a knight ran up to him and saluted.

“Captain Trance, I am Lieutenant Joshun with the Siege Works, my captain sent me to let you know that we are in your command. We have four catapults, two power bows, and two power rams ready to go, we await your pleasure.”

Relief blazed in Trance’s face and he returned the Lieutenants salute, “Tell your captain he has my thanks and appreciation.” He looked at his chron before adding, “We will be leaving in six minutes.”

“That sounds fine with us, we are all set to go,” the Lieutenant saluted one more time and raced off.

Taking one more relaxing breath Trance went over to Odin. “Are you ready for another ride,” he said and patted his horse on the neck.

“Yes, I am ready to go. I am fully charged and ready. However, you must know that I only have two thirds of my bolts. We might have time for me to get fully armed and be better to help you,” Odin said.

Trance sat and took a moment to think. It would take a few minutes to completely load. He only had a moment to consider what Odin had said and then he looked at the other horses. “Everyone, check your ammo for your horses. Anyone that needs to load up, follow me and let's get the horses fully armed. Thank you Odin.” That was good advice; yes it was best to go fully loaded. It might mean they leave a couple minutes later than he originally wanted yet the extra bolts could only help. Would they be enough, could they get there in time and rescue Corena. At the moment he couldn’t bring himself to think of either possibility, all he knew at this moment was that he had to give it his all, and he turned Odin to head to the arming shed near the stable followed by several others. In his head he heard the old phrase that time was ticking.

Chapter 33

The Eagle and the Bat

King Axlor of Boulthora sat delighted in his throne room at the Boulthorian outpost. In reality it was an ancient Althorian castle here in the midst of the kingdom of Cator. To his left sat General Bruise and General Tork, and to his right sat Vengethor and Roamer. Relaxed sitting in his dress armor, lighter and more elaborate and detailed with filigree than his usual battle armor Axlor had savored hearing the report that Corena had been captured and was on her way. At last his plan had been a success. However, there had been a cost and a couple disappointing issues.

First the incredibly annoying fact that the Althorians had sent their Storm Hawks, which had destroyed the troop ships, so the princess had to be driven here on the road. Second, his ground force had to take a much longer road to get here since the Althorians had sent reinforcements earlier than expected. That was frustrating, but at last his forces were almost here and as soon as they had Corena they would take her to the waiting royal chariot ship and head to the Volutus waiting in orbit and fly back to Boulthora. Finally he had this lousy Althorian kingdom under his power and the rest of the planet will follow suit.

With a pause in conversation, a knight came in holding his helmet and he rushed forward and saluted, “Sire I have important news.”

Axlor chuckled and looking at his generals and son, he gave a lazy salute back. This could only be good news. “At last, what news do you have for us.”

The knight swallowed and did his best to formulate the news he had to give, “Sire, we have a serious problem. The Althorians have closed off all of our communications and seven Althorian space battleships have forced the Volutus out of orbit and are not allowing it to stay. They are actually threatening to shoot it down if it remains in Althorian space.”

Axlor’s eyes opened wide in surprise and he roared, “They did what! They wouldn’t dare, Maximus knows better than that. There will be reprisals for that, we will have to increase our raids and send out more dragons. Maybe they need to lose a year's worth of crops.”

The knight quaked slightly as he continued, “There is more. They are no longer responding to any of our communications and blocking them as well.”

At this Axlor was on his feet and fumed as his generals also growled from their seats. “What in blazes is Maximus up to? He knows we have his daughter and yet he is acting like this. Maybe he doesn’t realize how perilous his actions are. It makes me wonder how he feels about his daughter,” he said and got a laugh from General Bruise. Axlor turned to the knight, “Return to your post. I will send a communication to Maximus and let him know what will happen to the princess if he continues to act like a fool.” He went to his throne here on Althora and activated his kytherum as his generals and his son looked on.

“This is King Axlor calling King Maximus. We have your daughter, if you want to see her again, you will signal your space fleet to back off and let us depart. Failure to allow us to leave will result in injury to her, continued resistance and she will need the hospital. You know I will do as I said.”

Instantly there was a reply message; was it live or recorded, King Maximus appeared on screen, “Axlor, I know you have captured my daughter. Of all of the atrocities you have authorized and committed on this planet and in my kingdom this is the last. Your raids and actions are no longer to be tolerated and will be met with lethal effect. Now you have three hours to return my daughter here to the palace unharmed and you are to leave Althora. Any refusal will result in your forfeiture of all of your outposts in Cator. You have three hours,” and the screen went blank.

Axlor looked at the blank screen for a few seconds and tapped a key and the screen remained empty. “How dare he threaten me or anyone in the galaxy! He will have to learn again what it means to defy me. As soon as we leave and get back to Boulthora I will send more dragons and men and I want his whole system burned down, crops farms and his military, we take no prisoners.”

“I will lead and start right away,” said Tork. “I will target the nearest rook and bring it down.”

“And I will take pleasure in heading for Bengal Castle and this time there is no force that will stop us from taking it,” declared General Bruise.

“If you desire father, we will lead our forces toward one of the nearest Althorian rooks south and uproot it,” said Vengethor boldly, “Of course that will be after our ceremony on Boulthora. And then we can let them know what position they are really in.”

Then another knight entered, “Highness, the assault force is just arriving and they have your guest.”

“Finally, the fruit is ready and picked. Now let’s see what our Maximus has to say,” Axlor said and turned to his kytherum, “Maximus, I have your daughter, and the princess has agreed to come with us back to Boulthora. If you want to see her again you will call off your fleet and let us leave.”

Immediately the screen came to life and Maximus appeared again, “Axlor, I know you have captured my daughter and I want her back. Also your raids and atrocities are at an end. You have two and a half hours to return my daughter to the palace unharmed or you forfeit all of your outposts. There will be no negotiating, return Princess Corena or pay the consequences,” and the screen went blank.

Axlor sat there stunned for a moment and then he leaped up in a fury, but before he could utter a word another knight rushed in and spoke nearly out of breath, “Highness, the Althorians, they have an army advancing on the outpost.”

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As Trance led the column of Althorians toward the Boulthorian outpost his mind went back for a few minutes. He was grateful to his horse Odin for the advice on rearming all of the horses. Fortunately with everyone helping out it had only taken an extra ten minutes to get all of the horses fully loaded with crossbow bolts for their built in crossbows. A few knights and Golden Griffins were still surprised at how Trance had improved Odin and his crossbows as well as the size and capacity of the bolts. They were slightly thicker and stout than the typical bolt and more durable with armor piercing bolt heads and Odin had a higher capacity of bolts.

Shortly after they were fully armed Trance took the lead of his division as well as the Telvian Coursers knight division and the siege machines. As they picked up their pace down the road he had an idea and called King Maximus, “Sire, I have a thought that may buy us some time. Continue to ignore all of their communications, they only want to use them to bully us and try to humiliate you. Use that against them, when they call and say anything about Corena give them a response, say something along the lines of return her in say maybe three hours to start and that due to their activities they will no longer be tolerated. Then let them know that if she is not returned then they forfeit all of their outposts, in essence we let them know that we are going to kick them out of our kingdom and take back our property, period. Also add that there will be no negotiating, they return her or pay. They will learn the rest after we have her back.”

Maximus looked thoughtful, “I like that. I will actually make a few statements and change it up a little for each statement. Maybe set it to every half hour. I hope this gives you the time you need. Trance, I pray for your success. Please take care of yourself and don’t take anything for granted. One more caution, Axlor is an extremely skilled swordsman and so is Vengethor his son.”

“Thank you. I will do everything I can to get her out of there and bring her back,” Trance said bravely. He had to show his calm resolve, however, inside he had a few second thoughts. No, I can’t go there, I have to believe that we will succeed. Please God give me the courage and skill to rescue Corena.

How far behind are we, he wondered. He consulted with Captain Wallean and shared his thoughts. A half hour later and they were joined by a Golden Griffin division and two more divisions of knights under their banners of Iron Valley Elk and Quartz Moose, the Golden Griffins banner showed a sleek Granite Panther. The captains rode up and consulted with Wallean and Trance before falling in line. Trance was feeling his hopes rise as he continued down the road and they went up even further as twenty minutes later another Golden Griffin division, the Violet Bobcats, followed by two more divisions of knights, Auroran Unicorns and Silver Rammers. Now maybe our chances have gone up.

As he took a drink of water from his canteen he had a thought and pulled up the map on Odin’s info screen. Highlighted was the road they were on heading toward the Boulthorian outpost and the time to destination and miles were listed. Then he noticed a side road. “Odin, what is this road on the map? It looks like it's only a few miles from us and seems to be a faster route to the Boulthorian outpost,” he said as he clicked on it.

Odin’s computer system quickly processed the information and accessed his database and a moment later the mechanical voice spoke, “That is a very old road, but my information shows that it is still in very good shape and is still in use. Your assumption is correct; it goes to the Boulthorian outpost. Actually the structure is a very old Althorian rook, once the state capital of Yowland. This is curious, that road is a more direct route to the rook. In fact it will take us there nearly an hour sooner than our current road. Give me a moment.” Odin took a moment to process and then spoke in what could be an electronic excited young knight's voice, “I accessed where the Boulthorians are on the road and if we took this new route, we could arrive within a few minutes of them. Depending on our speed, we might only be four minutes behind them.”

Trance’s eyes opened wide with excitement and immediately he called all of the other captains and let them know of the new route they were going to take. Moments later he found the turnoff and they turned down the ancient road and were soon racing down it. Thank you God, another thing in our favor. Now he wondered if they could get there before the Boulthorians activated their defenses.

However, after a half hour some of the captains began to question the road they were on, “This can’t be right, we are headed the wrong way,” one captain said. They checked their maps and were confused but followed. Trance was too focused ahead and did not hear these issues. He would have been disappointed that they did not consider some of the old maps or roads. At least the road was actually in good shape and easy to travel on, even for the siege machines and there was hardly any traffic. Only occasionally did they have to go past a few local farmers who were all taken by surprise at the host heading up the road.

Then another surprise, the captains of the Caracals and Ocelots called to say they were on their way, “Where are you at and we will meet you.” After Trance explained about the road and gave them the location the first captain replied, “That is very smart. I know that road and we are actually not too far from there. We should meet up with you in about thirty-four minutes and we should not be too far from the Boulthorian outpost. How many divisions are with you.”

“We currently have three Golden Griffin divisions and five divisions of knights. With your two Golden Griffin divisions we have a considerable force. For once we have the upper hand. We have the Boulthorians bottled up with fighters keeping their troop ships away and the space fleet blocking their space battleship. Now, they will have to answer to us,” Trance said boldly and thankfully.

Almost to the minute the host of knights and Golden Griffins met up with the other two Golden Griffin divisions and Trance was pleased to see Thon, the daggerman from the Brass Leopards who he had given the small crossbow to. “After you helped us escape the Boulthorians and then led us to successfully defend Bengal Castle I made a lot of friends in the Bronze Caracals so I asked and was transferred to their division. And you should know, I was able to qualify with this crossbow, and I learned one more thing,” Thon said proudly as he rode up by Trance for a moment.

“What is that,” Trance said laughing and excited for the man.

“This crossbow is Althorian. I wonder how those Boulthorians got it. Well it’s mine now,” Thon said proudly and followed his division to a place in the host along with the Valley Ocelots.

Outwardly Trance did his best to look confident to all of the men following him. He laughed with his friends from his division and his new friends in the other divisions. He was determined to show the captains and men that he could lead and that he had a definite battle plan. All the while he was nervous and anxious. What was he leading them to? What kind of defenses did the Boulthorians have and how many men were they about to take on at their outpost. How large was the outpost and where would they keep Corena?

Trance consulted the map and saw that they would soon learn the answers to his questions. Sure enough just over an hour later and he could see the outpost on the top of a hill. Then he was nearly shocked, the Boulthorians that had assaulted Pikes Head and captured Princess Corena seemed to appear from what was considered the main road and were not very far ahead of them. Still there was enough distance that as Trance and his knights and Golden Griffins were still maybe a mile out, he saw the Boulthorians ride through the gate and the gate close behind them.

While riding closer Trance scanned the outposts' walls looking for their defenses, and only moments later he was startled at what he saw. As archers started pouring along the wall, he couldn’t possibly count them, two large crossbows appeared on the wall above the gate and then from four towers along the wall he saw what looked like large machine gun barrels, that was strange, there were no guns allowed anywhere. Then he learned the truth of those barrels as Trance gave orders for his men to raise their shields.

The barrels were actually rectangular and behind them was a sophisticated system. A Boulthorian knight sat in a targeting chair and used it to aim at the approaching Althorians and a loading mechanism with stacks of bright metal blades. Each blade was slightly smaller than a domino and lethally shaped and sharpened like the end of a razor sharp chisel. These blades were dropped on a high powered motorized system of rollers and sped them to fire out of the barrels at a velocity equal to a crossbow bolt.

Fortunately Trance was out of the weapons range. This was going to be a serious challenge, he thought. Maybe we can level some of the odds and he gave orders for the catapults and large power bows to be set up and aimed at the tower weapons and large crossbows on the gate. The crews immediately went to work as the siege weapons dropped their stabilizer legs and they started to pull back and arm the weapons and aimed at their targets. Moments later spear sized bolts were flying as well as large carefully shaped metal and granite balls smashed into the walls and towers.

Flights of arrows now joined in bringing death to both sides. Trance ordered, “Spearmen in front and defend the archers. Archers take aim and shoot anyone in range,” and he took up a position with the archers and drew an arrow and let it fly. Jerethone sent one arrow after another sending speeding death to every Boulthorian archer unfortunate to show too much of himself.

As Trance directed his men forward slowly and he sent one arrow after another at the Boulthorians on the wall and dodging the deadly tower guns he had another problem to solve. How to get the power rams to the gate? Then one of the catapults fired and the deadly granite ball took out one of the nearest tower guns. Now might be the chance, “There, form a tortoise shield around the power rams and get them to the gate,” Trance commanded.

Then around each of the two power rams fourteen knights formed up and raised their shields and the rams went forward. If a knight went down another knight rode up and took his place. Gradually they made their way to the gate and the crew went to work slamming the weapon into the gate. Slam crash, and the powerful hydraulic piston fired and slammed the hard wedge blade into the gate forcing it open.

“Look out,” Hamon called and Trance looked up and was shocked. There flying toward them were five ultra light bat shaped fighters. If it had been another time he would have thought them funny as his mind swiftly thought about a comic book superhero from his youth. That character had been a favorite of many of his friends, however, he preferred another superhero. He shook his head to focus on the new threat.

The bats were surprisingly swift and agile, powered by small fanjets much like the jets on the flying horses. Trance regretted the fact that he had left Odin’s flight pack at the palace, at the time he didn’t think he had time to get it. Well you can’t go back in time, he thought and studied the bats more.

The pilot sat in a simple and elegant seat that could be considered a cockpit below the body of the bat that was shaped like a hunting bat and they were armed with crossbows exactly like those on the robot warhorses. Trance witnessed how deadly accurate they were as one bat swooped down and shot a knight to his left.

Terror was threatening to overwhelm him as Trance began to wonder if he had led all of these men to a killing… No, he couldn’t let his mind go there. There was always a solution to any problem no matter how difficult. Then as another bat was zooming down he drew another arrow and fired at it. Typical he thought as he missed, was it his aim or the skill of the pilot. Then to his horror he saw the bat fly over and gun down a knight by Kyle. He drew another arrow and sent it after the bat and missed it.

Trance had a moment of regret that he didn’t think he had paid attention to his older adoptive brother lately. At the moment he wasn’t sure if he had said anything when he had noticed that Kyle had been promoted to Order Sergeant. If we survive this and succeed he would have to let him know how proud of him he was. Then what of his other friends and a glance showed him that Hamon, Gracer, Mandor, and Zam were all there around him with their shields raised more to protect him than themselves. Another roaring zoom and he looked to see another bat flying in and shooting a Golden Griffin square in the chest.

What could hit one of them? A quick look showed him that the catapults were still trying to take out the remaining tower guns as they had successfully disabled the far right tower gun and one of the crossbows on the gate. The power bows were still giving support and were slowly eliminating archers from the wall. Then he swung his head and he called out, “Jerethone, do you think you can hit one of those bats.”

Jerethone released another arrow and looked over at him and he only moved his head slightly in response and he took another arrow and drew it as one of the bats was making another pass shooting down knights and Golden Griffins. The arrow left the Thunderhead bow and hit the pilot like lightning and the bat swerved off and crashed in a small fireball several feet away from the bulk of the Althorian forces. Trance had stationed them there out of range until the gate was opened.

“Can I help,” called Thon who had been making his way gradually forward and was now near Jerethone.

Jerethone looked at the man and had he still been with Rex he might have blown the man off, however, he had seen how accurate Thon had become with the crossbow. “Yeah, if we work together we might be able to get another one of them out of the air.” And together they lined up on the nearest bat and fired. The pilot must have seen his fellow shot down and swerved dodging their first volley, but he underestimated their persistence and skill and he was suddenly stunned to be pierced by an arrow and a bolt, he might have survived except for another arrow from another Golden Griffin archer.

Trance reached for his quiver and found it empty. How had he fired all of his arrows? Almost in frustration he unstrung his bow and put it in Odin’s holder and was in the process of getting his shield when he saw another bat coming in. He ducked and watched as it fired at knights on its way toward Kyle again. Not again, he screamed in his head as he watched it shoot another knight near Kyle who kept his shield raised and as it passed he hurled a spear at it. The spear hit one of the wings and bounced off.

For a moment time seemed to slow as the bat turned and was heading back when Trance set his shield aside and almost unconsciously he reached for his beloved dagger. Could he do it, he didn’t know and it was his only chance. Did he have the arm strength and skill, maybe from the ground, but he had never tried this from horseback. He didn’t know he was holding his breath as he held the bowie knife with the eagle head on its handle he pulled his hand back keeping his eye on the bats pilot. He only had one try at this as he brought his hand back and kept his focus on his target. Then with a prayer that his aim was true he swung his arm and let the knife fly, as the bat seemed to bore down on Kyle.

High above a hawk flew over the raging battle as the eagle knife sliced through the air and sunk into the bat pilot’s throat. One instant he was flying toward a group of Althorian knights and was sadistically gleeful at shooting them down when the knife struck him and his life’s blood and air was flowing out of him. He never felt the bat fly up and out and then slam into the ground just a hundred yards from the reserved men. Then for some unknown reason one of the Golden Griffins went over to the flaming wreck and looked and noticed the dagger and recognizing it he reached in and withdrew the knife and he put it in his belt for safekeeping.

“What did you do that for,” his captain asked.

“I don’t know, I just had an impression that I need to return it to Captain Trance,” the man said. He shook as a chill went through him as he tried and failed to explain why he needed to retrieve the knife.

Trance drew his sword and continued to direct the archers and moved gradually forward. Then from the front the captain with the power rams called him. “They must have reinforced the gate, it’s taking us a little longer to punch through. We could use some more cover as we keep going. I know how the gate was hung and we should be through. You should get ready, they will probably have a very unfriendly welcome for us as soon as the gate goes.”

Trance ordered the archers forward more and watched as more of them were running out of arrows and setting their bows aside and getting their shields and other weapons, swords, axes, maces, and other weapons. Thon was nearly out of bolts for his crossbow and Jerethone was moving about asking for arrows from other archers and sending them up as quickly as he got them. Soon he would even have to get his sword.

There was a thunderous crash as now the far left tower gun was smashed by the combined effort of two catapults and multiple granite balls took out the gun and the gunner. Then a metal catapult ball followed by a granite ball hit and smashed the remaining large crossbow. Trance took a couple nervous swings of his sword as he watched the catapult crews were angling and targeting the last tower gun. Then from up front there was a monstrous groan and crack and at last the gate gave way and a torrent of Boulthorians poured out. The hawk continued to fly above as Trance turned his energy on getting his men in the outpost and he could look for Corena. I pray she is safe and we can return her to the capital.

Chapter 34

The Princess and the Key

The moment the gate crashed open a hoard of Boulthorian knights swarmed out and nearly took out all of the men with the power rams. The captain had been here before and had his shield ready the moment the gate opened. It was lucky, it kept him alive and he strove to hold his place with his ax. For a few moments he fought almost alone as the majority of his men were just swept away, then to his relief Trance and most of the archers now armed with their alternate weapons charged forward.

With the gate open the reserved knights and Golden Griffins took up their arms and raced forward and joined the battle at the gate. Trance on Odin swung his sword furiously and at times more recklessly than he normally would. There were too many opponents to focus on one knight at a time. The moment he dispatched one knight there was another or two more who took over. To his right Hamon was on his horse and driving back several Boulthorian knights with his hammer. Gracer and Mandor were working together to the left and doing their best to make an opening for Trance to get in the outpost.

Kyle and members of his division of knights stormed forward. Kyle had never fought this many Boulthorians before. In his division he had gone out and fought raiding divisions of Boulthorians before, but this was beyond those skirmishes. Often he found himself envying Trance and his adventures. Now he was there in a major battle and he wanted to make sure his brother was successful in this mission to rescue Princess Corena. Then he noticed a banner and a few enemy surcoats that had haunted his memory and he rose up swinging his sword with a vengeance he hadn’t felt before.

Zam was just behind Trance and was doing his best to protect his friends back. Skillfully he battled every Boulthorian knight with deadly efficiently. He had learned more from watching and studying Trance than when he was in training. Now his skills were really needed and he was determined to follow his friend wherever he went and indeed he knew where that might lead. Only for a moment did a passage of scripture give him peace and he said a silent prayer that he was worthy and noble to fight beside his friend.

Slowly and one foot at a time at first Trance and the Althorian knights and Golden Griffins fought to enter the outpost. Gradually the Boulthorians were driven back and they fought back more viciously. Trance saw an opportunity and he activated Odin’s crossbows and mowed down a path through the Boulthorians deeper into the outpost and the main building was just ahead of him. Who knew what lurked in there, as the building was almost a third of the size of the palace at Caldora.

Trance fired Odin’s crossbows again and then took a moment to consult his horse, “We are nearly there, do you have any information on their outpost? Where is the prison or dungeon? Would they put Corena in a tower, or a lower level dungeon?”

Odin’s processor took only a moment, “The plans for this building are still available and she would probably be put in one of the lower level cells. I can get you to the door and I will guard your entry. I know I’m just a machine and these are the words that my program says are appropriate, but good luck.”

Trance took a moment to pat Odin on the neck and said, “ You are more than a horse or a machine to me. When I go in there you stay safe and do what you can to help our friends. You can activate and fire the crossbows automatically. When you’re empty, do what you can and just be safe and I’ll see you again.” Unbidden, a tear slid down his cheek and he let it go. “Let’s go, lead the way we got a mission to fulfill.”

Hamon and Kyle had teamed up and were just to the right of Trance and with a look they turned to hack and smash forward, opening a path and protecting Trance on the right, just as Gracer and Mandor slashed away on the left. Zam and Thon had teamed up and protected the rear. Thon proved to be very skilled with his short sword and thrust it into a Boulthorian wielding a bladed mace. Meanwhile Bear and Zak were clearing a path ahead of the others, and finally some of the Boulthorians were backing away from Bear and his fierce ax.

At the steps in front of the central building Trance dismounted and took on three Boulthorian knights and drove them back. Soon he was leading several men into the building. Taking advantage of a small break in the entry he turned and addressed them, “I’m going to search the lower levels. Split up into groups and search the building. Keep tight and protect each other, and whoever finds her, get her safely home.”

They split up and raced off and took on every enemy knight they encountered. Trance entered the main entrance area followed by a mix of knights and Golden Griffins. A swarm of Boulthorians came from the stairs and corridors and Axlor and Vengethor directed their knights from a balcony, and General Bruise and General Tork drew their swords and took positions at the top of the stairs and shouted orders and threats also.

Trance was surprised when he looked up and saw Axlor in his dress armor next to his son. Never had he thought he would ever be this close to them. No matter, he had to find Corena; he could deal with them later. He moved across the room and with deadly efficiency swung his sword and carved his way to the stairs going down.

Axlor saw the curious Golden Griffin. Could this be the one he had been getting reports on from the divisions that were defeated in Amberia and the force defeated at Bengal Castle? He drew his sword and headed to the stairs, and then he turned to Vengethor, “Stay alert and stay here, I’ll take care of this. Roamer, if anything happens, get him out of here. You have my orders, stay out of this.” He proceeded to the main entry and he raised his sword and brought death to three Althorian knights and then he moved to the stairs stalking the Golden Griffin with the hunter green surcoat with the large feline.

Trance fought his way down the stairs and finally had a break and he continued down and he went searching down one corridor after another. Boulthorian knights were taken by surprise at his appearance and drew their weapons and advanced on him. More than one was surprised at his skill and three actually witnessed him slay two of their company and they turned and fled. Trance was breathing hard and kept going and a small part of his brain registered that he was by himself. Please God be with the others and protect them. He paused for a moment to catch his breath and kept going and found another staircase going down.

At the bottom of this last staircase Trance found vast catacombs. He stopped and looked around, where he should go. It was curious that there were no guards at the moment. He stood still a minute longer and heard something down one of the halls and went that direction as drops of blood fell from the blade of his sword; it was the same strange sword he had found. Unconsciously he flexed his hand on the hilt that was much like his own sword's hilt that was just long enough for two hands and the blade was almost as long and broad as his sword. There was the sound again and he followed it and rounded a corner and confronted eight Boulthorian knights. This must be it he thought as he raised his sword to his assertive stance and waited.

The knights were taken by surprise and then swiftly drew their weapons and the first advanced. Trance met them halfway and he swung the sword blocking their blows and took some on his shield. He drove forward with his sword blazing and with lethal skill he brought down first one enemy knight and the next moment he drove his sword through the second knight. Now the others charged him in the close quarters and he furiously fought them back and slew one and then another fell holding his opened belly. Trance felt his stomach twist slightly and his nose wrinkled at the coppery stink of blood.

Trance kept his sword moving and took and delivered blows and he struck down one Boulthorian knight after another. He had to keep going; certainly this was where Corena was being held. The last couple men turned and bolted, he stood there panting and one of the men at his feet tried for a moment to crawl away even as his life drained away. Trance felt mercy for the man and looked away as he struggled a moment more and succumbed. Alone at the moment, except for the Boulthorian corpses, he searched for the key and found it on one of the fallen men.

He turned the key in the lock and opened the door and was met with silence. Strange he would think Corena would be yelling at her captors and trying to find out what was going on. On entering the room he found it empty. This made no sense, why were eight knights guarding an empty room. His eyes were adapting to the gloom and he decided to search the room just in case there were signs of Corena’s presence or a clue as to her fate. Surprisingly the floor was fairly clean and there were some scuff marks from possibly armored boots. He then searched the wall and was struck that the far wall opposite the door to the hall had looked like another door. Setting his shield down and sheathing his sword he carefully searched the walls and found a secret compartment and a key inside. Was the princess inside some inner chamber and that was why he had not heard anything.

He ran his hand around the inner door and found the keyhole. Trance immediately inserted and turned the key and the lock clicked and he felt the door open. He jerked the door and looked inside to find he was inside an ancient vault. What in Heaven is this, he asked himself with no answer, except a tickle at the back of his mind. Slowly he stepped into the vault as if he had been there before. His eyes swept the room and rested on an ancient case. Why was this so familiar, as he strode to the thickly dust covered case. It took several swipes of his hand to clear away enough dust to see inside and what he saw was not what he expected at all.

Laying in the case wasn’t jewels, or gold or silver ornaments; it was a large nondescript key. It was like a skeleton key with many loops on the one end and the opposite end with an intricate tab on the central barrel. Questions buzzed in his head, where was it from, how old was this key, what did it open, how long had it been here, and why on Althora was it being guarded. It had to be important but why, he couldn’t possibly know. He thought about just leaving and continuing his search for Corena when he had a compulsion at the same time as a memory flashed, only for an instant and he brought his right fist on the glass. It resisted for a moment and he drew his hand back again and with a great deal of force drove his fist down again and this time smashed the glass and felt it grate on his fingers and a slight wet from a cut finger. Almost unconsciously and ignoring the blood and cut fingers he opened his hand and grabbed the key and removed it from the case.

His head tilted to one side as he looked at the key as if he expected something and then just shrugged his shoulders and put the key in his empty quiver. He left the vault and took up his shield and drew his sword again and left the room stepping over the Boulthorian corpses and explored down the hall and turned a corner. He explored for another ten minutes and didn’t encounter any more Boulthorian knights, curious, and he prayed again for the safety of the knights and Golden Griffins with him and hoped the battle was going in their favor.

Trance strode quickly down another long corridor and finally heard something. He couldn’t make it out entirely and he sped up. He heard it again and turned another corner and there in front of him were six Boulthorian knights with drawn weapons and this time he clearly heard Corena’s voice yelling at her guards, “You need to release me. I am the royal princess of Cator and this is against all of our treaties. You release me you filthy murdering bags of sager excrement, I hope our Golden Griffins and knights chop your limbs off and leave you nothing. I am not going anywhere with you, now release me now!”

The Boulthorian knights did their best to ignore her and stood guard and then they heard someone approaching and expecting either Axlor or Vengethor any moment, only when they turned it was a lone Althorian knight, or was it a Golden Griffin. It didn’t matter he was alone and there were six of them. “Well princess, you have a visitor. Maybe we’ll let him see you. Actually you can watch as he sends him to the grave,” said one of the Boulthorian knights.

Corena was shocked, she had thought she had seen an Althorian army coming just as she was hurried through the gate and then it closed behind her and she was rushed in the building and was brought here and thrust in this cell. None of the guards spoke to her all the way here and she thought at one moment that she spotted Axlor and Vengethor and maybe two of Axlor’s generals. Was it possible that her father had sent a rescue force? And then a thought passed her brain and she was excited and terrified. Could he be here, it seemed impossible, or rather improbable.

Another sound seemed to come from behind Trance as he again took up his assertive stance and prepared to fight these six Boulthorians. As they leered at him the sound came again and he could identify the noise, it sounded like armored boots coming. Whose were they? I will know when they get here, if they are for me they can help me or at least help Corena get out of here, and if they are more Boulthorians he would have a real struggle. If this is my end, Lord, at least help us get Corena home, and he strode forward.

Three Boulthorians moved forward, raising their weapons excitedly. Finally an opportunity to use their skill and they expected this Althorian to put up a pitiful fight and then fall to them. What they got was a very skilled swordsman that had a purpose and if he had any fear, it was buried deep in his soul.

Fear, Trance felt it and he was scared. What was he afraid of? He didn’t have more than a moment to think of fear, and there are times though that minutes, hours, or even lifetimes can take place in a moment. Indeed he didn’t think he was afraid of the six Boulthorians. They could be more powerful and skilled than him. It was just a thought, part unpleasant to think what they could do to him, yet he thanked God that he could only die once. When dead he wouldn’t feel anything more, whatever they decided to do with his body. It wasn’t pleasant thinking of dying, and yes there was some fear. But what he feared, well he said his prayer that his sins were forgiven. Lord my soul is yours, it has been from youth, please help me either in my life or death rescue Corena.

Trance blocked, parried, and thrust and he felt his arms getting tired and he struck down the first and second Boulthorian knight. The third stopped and for a fatal moment looked past him and the other three Boulthorian knights quickly raised their weapons and prepared to fight and charged forward. Trance readied his sword and met the blade of a Boulthorian sword and half expected a fatal blow from behind only it didn’t come. Instead a familiar voice was yelling and a blur passed him with a hammer that crashed into another enemy. Then to his other side a smaller knight rushed past with a short sword that thrust into another enemy as a roar that few had ever heard and few had lived to remember and an ax wielded by a very large shadow of death.

Courage, what was it, Trance didn’t know for sure, but he knew one thing, his life and soul belonged to God, and in a small part Corena, and he felt more relaxed and if not stronger, it was determination that fueled his arm as he swung his sword and struck down the last Boulthorian between him and the cell door.

“Trance,” Corena could hardly believe it. “How, I don’t care, get me out of here.”

Bear, Hamon, and a wounded Thon stood guard as Trance searched the dead and dying Boulthorians for the key. He found it on the third man he searched and unlocked the cell door and Corena almost ran out and wrapped her arms around Trance. Blood transferred and stained her clothes from his bloody surcoat. Corena stepped back to look at him, he was here and the love in his hazel eyes blazed. Then he sheathed his sword and reached down and it was then that it looked like he was going to remove his sword belt.

“Trance you cannot take off your weapons, we still need to get out of here,” Corena said.

“I’m not,” Trance said, and it was then she noticed that he was wearing two sword belts and another to realize that the second was her belt with her sword and dagger. “You’ll need to take one of their shields. It would have been rather difficult to carry your shield and mine,” and she wrapped her arms around him and kissed him before taking her sword belt and putting it on before reaching down and taking a shield and drawing her sword.

Bear turned and nodded to the princess, “Zak and Gracer are at the top of the stairs and Mandor and Zam are trying to hold the stair entrance on the main floor.”

“That works, now let us get out of here,” Trance said and he moved forward. Bear for his part took the lead and flexed his ax as if he was anxious to cleave some more.

They trooped forward and made for the stairs. Suddenly they all stopped as they heard several booted feet coming toward them and as one they raised their weapons and waited and sure enough a dozen Boulthorian knights came and stormed around a corner and headed forward. Bear raised his ax and brought it down and the fight was on. All of them found an opponent or two. Corena was determined she would have her freedom one way or the other and as she slew her opponent she saw Trance take on two enemy knights at the same time keeping them away from her.

The little group fought and left most of the Boulthorians lying lifeless on the floor as one turned and fled in terror and another mortally wounded crawled away. Bear again took the lead and the others surrounded Corena and went down one corridor after another and again they were met with resistance and they fought again to move forward.

At last they found the stairs and went up and heard the clash of weapons and found more Golden Griffins and knights struggling to keep more Boulthorians from heading down. They joined the fight and fought forward, they had to get to the last set of stairs. Corena again and again showed how skilled she was as she swung her sword with its open rose shaped pommel and the crosspiece that at a certain angle were upswept thorns and it was etched with a branch with thorns. Even the triforged blade had an etching of thorns. She smiled inwardly that her sword was like her, beautiful and deadly, oh great what a pun.

Trance was really feeling the strain in both his arms and he was really breathing heavy now. We have to get to that second stair; “Bear if anything happens, make sure you get her out of here.”

Bear cleaved another unfortunate Boulthorian knight and looked at him, “I promise, just keep going. We need you more than you know. If anything I will give my life so that you and the princess get out of here.”

As they fought their way across the room Corena paused a moment after she withdrew her sword from another Boulthorian knight and she looked as Trance was battling two more Boulthorians. That’s curious, she thought, that’s not his sword. It’s very similar but it’s not the same, where did it come from. She shrugged, I will find out later, and she turned to find another enemy knight coming at her with an ax. Her sword flashed and she advanced to meet him.

Fallen Boulthorians littered the floor as Trance and his group of rescuers and Princess Corena fought across the room to the stairs to the main floor. Now Bear and Hamon took the lead and Thon followed. Trance worried about him, Thon was definitely wounded and was in serious pain, but he refused to leave them and insisted he do his part. The sound of clashing weapons above was almost thunderous as they neared the top of the stairs and the melee they saw as they stepped onto the main floor was staggering.

Dead and dying knights covered the floor and Trance could easily see Axlor directing his troops and occasionally executing an unfortunate Golden Griffin or knight that got too close to him. A glance showed that Vengethor and another Boulthorian standing next to him looked longingly at the fierce battle from the balcony. Another look showed that the two Generals were also back and directing more Boulthorians and only occasionally engaging an opponent.

“Head to the door and let’s go,” Trance called as he engaged a Boulthorian knight with a vicious looking ax. He blocked the blow and attacked and the man raised his ax and made his mistake and Trance thrust his sword and the man fell holding himself. Trance stepped past the man and fought another and raised his shield to not only protect himself he was keeping any Boulthorian knights from getting behind Corena.

Then halfway across to the door a Golden Griffin fought his way over to Trance and helped dispatch another Boulthorian knight and in a brief pause he extended his hand to Trance. In his hand the man was handing him a very familiar dagger with an eagle head on the handle. Trance was completely delighted and surprised since he thought he might never see his dagger again. Just as he was going to thank the Golden Griffin, Axlor had stepped forward and with a violent swing of his sword nearly decapitated the man in front of Trance.

Trance backed up and just had time to sheath his dagger and raise his shield to take Axlor’s next blow. Shock, horror, and rage bubbled up in him. Most men would have fallen back in terror at the approach of Axlor’s huge frame with his black surcoat emblazoned with a silver panther over his dress armor and a curiously distinct long sword. As their swords crashed together Trance saw an opening for his friends and men and he ordered, “Fall back and get Corena out of here and get back to the palace! I have one more thing to do!” and he turned to face King Axlor, the Dragon of Boulthora. Could a mere mountain lion win against a dragon?

Chapter 35

The Griffin and the Dragon

Axlor swung his sword again and again and Trance blocked with his shield and his sword and fought back. “So the reports I got on you were correct. May I have the pleasure of knowing your name,” Axlor said in mock politeness as he took his very aggressive stance.

Trance took his assertive stance as the battle continued to rage even as his friends surrounded Corena and at one point Bear handed off his shield and with his powerful left hand took hold of Corena and pulled her with him. “My name is Terrance Sonderson, most know me as Trance. I really don’t think you care what my name is. You just want to kill me anyway,” and he blocked another blow with his sword. “I’m just curious why you’re here and why you decided to break several treaties and kidnap the princess.” As he looked Axlor in the face, he was surprised that Axlor stood there with his sword and shield and was not wearing his helmet, could this be another example of how arrogant Axlor was.

Axlor took a leading step back and taunted Trance, “Ah, well Trance it is a pleasure. That will look good on your grave marker. I also see you want me to tell you my plans and the reason for my actions. I will have to disappoint you, I am not going to tell you of all people what my plan was, no, you’ll never know. Well perhaps your spirit will learn what we are up to.”

“Very well. At least Corena is out of here and on her way home and you can’t touch her. Also just so you know and if you haven’t heard yet you and your dignitaries and knights are no longer allowed here. Your actions this last year and your capture of Corena you have now forfeited all of your outposts. Take this moment and call your men off and you’ll be allowed to leave Cator. Also I think you should be prepared, I think, when word of this gets out you are being kicked off of Althora, permanently.”

Axlor continued to fall back and then stopped and tilted his head back to laugh, “That is a good joke. Maximus would never be that stupid and authorize that. That could be considered him declaring war and he would never do that. Besides he loves peace so much that is why he hasn’t ever really come after us during our raids. He only wants to beat us back so the raids don’t do too much damage, well let’s just say that our raids will continue and get worse for him and sooner or later I will have what I want. But you shouldn’t worry about that, your pathetic adventures and story are about to come to an end.”

Trance pressed and blocked every blow and he had to use all of his skill to keep Axlor back. He could tell that what he had heard was very accurate; Axlor was a superb swordsman. Was he just taunting him and using a fraction of his skill or toying with him? It didn’t matter at the moment, with a quick flash he saw in the corner of his eye a Boulthorian knight rush up to General Tork and say something in his ear and Tork was surprised and furiously shocked and looked as Bruise was brutally murdering another Althorian knight. Bruise looked over and Tork strode over to him and apparently passed along the message and Bruise looked equally furious. I wonder what is going on, but he didn’t have time to think about that, Axlor was still engaging him in a deadly duel.

“I think you have underestimated Maximus,” Trance decided to say and maybe distract Axlor from his generals. “The orders have already been given and I have spoken to him personally and it’s your story here that is at an end. You’ll hear of it officially sooner than you may believe. You can call this your official eviction notice,” and Trance swung his sword and blocked the next blow and instantly swung an attack at Axlor.

Axlor didn’t seem bothered, his confidence in his skill and his plan seemed to blind him to everything else. He didn’t even notice his generals and most of his knights were now being pushed back and actually heading for the back doors and gate. He didn’t even see a Boulthorian knight run up and talk to Vengethor who turned and furiously argued with the knight before heading back into the outpost with Roamer.

“If you are correct and Maximus has been swayed to be this utterly stupid, then he will not live long to regret this. Maybe it is even better and his defeat will be sweeter and I’ll have what I have desired sooner,” Axlor taunted as he continued to back away through the outpost.

“Actually,” Trance said as he grunted while blocking another vicious blow from Axlor and turned his sword away again, “You are mistaken, by taking Princess Corena captive, even now for such a short time, you have declared war on us and you will pay the consequences. Everyone will know how despicable you are,” and he pressed forward continuing his advance. He had the idea that he was being led somewhere, why and for what reason he would have to wait to learn. He just hoped that he was skilled enough to last long enough for Corena to be free.

Meanwhile outside Bear continued to pull Corena toward freedom as Mandor, Zam, and Hamon opened up a lane through the struggling and now falling away Boulthorian knights. As they reached the gate they were met with another host of Golden Griffins, knights, and an army of pawns, “We are here at your command Princess,” said one of the captains looking relieved. “Sorry, it took us a while to get organized. We got orders from King Maximus just two hours ago. We bring you all of our might from our watch post. Finally we can get them out of here,” he added as more of the host poured into the outpost. “With luck we will have control by the end of the day.”

Then another Althorian captain rode up with more news, “The Boulthorians are streaming out of the back gate. They are fleeing as if a dragon is breathing on their necks. I don’t think I have ever seen them riding that fast before. I can’t be certain, but I would have sworn that I saw General Bruise and General Tork astride their horses and heading out just minutes ago.”

Corena gave a contained smile and said, “You have my thanks captain. Which direction were the Boulthorians headed. We should notify our rooks and castles to be aware of them.”

“They are headed almost due north. I will make the notifications myself. If you need, we have four medical wagons there at a staging area,” he said and pointed behind him some two hundred yards away and he turned aside so he could call the rooks and castles along the line to alert them to the fleeing Boulthorians.

Corena finally had a moment to breathe and she tossed the hated Boulthorian shield aside. She looked back at the outpost and her heart trembled. Please Lord, watch over Trance and bring him out of there. Bring him back to me alive, and grateful tears flowed down her cheeks.

Inside the outpost Trance felt his arms starting to feel heavy and tired, but he had to keep going and his sword blocking blows from Axlor. They had moved quite a ways in the outpost and the sounds of battle were significantly less. Axlor kept falling back, but he wasn’t quite as taunting. Trance was proving more skilled than Axlor had suspected, and he had to really keep going himself because Trance kept blocking, parrying, thrusting, and attacking. And while Trance fought knowing what the end could bring, Axlor felt something he had not felt for years, fear.

Well it won’t last long, Axlor thought, just a little further. He drifted back a few more feet and out a door. Trance followed and swung his sword coming after him. Then Axlor turned and moved out of the way and Trance stood there in an inner courtyard. Axlor moved away, giving Trance a chance to look around and what he saw was shocking.

The area must have been a beautiful restful garden with some trees and columns, now it was desolate with the remains of a couple trees and everything looked scorched. A moment later Trance saw exactly why the area was scorched. A number of words crossed his mind as he threw himself behind a column as the castle protector dragon became aware of him and the mechanical beast pulled its head back and then shot forward and flames erupted and hit the column. Trance felt the heat and he knew he was in serious trouble.

The dragon stopped its flame and waited for its target to appear again. Vividly Trance remembered the dragon his Golden Griffin division the Golden Lynx had destroyed in Amberia. At that time though Marlett had directed the division on how to take out that dragon, and here Trance was alone facing this dragon and he was getting tired. What chance did he have as he moved from one column to another and the dragon roared and shot flames at him again. This time Trance didn’t have his bow and arrows to shoot out the eyes so he would have to think of another plan. Then as the dragon raised its head and neck again Trance had an idea.

Trance moved around again this time with more purpose and in the corner of his eye he spotted Axlor in an annex behind the dragon and he felt another set of eyes on him. As he took a small break he glanced up and saw Vengethor and Roamer. He had heard about both of them many times and he momentarily wondered if he would have to face them also. He would just have to survive the dragon first. He looked out from behind the column and he thought he might be close enough now. The dragon raised its mechanical head and neck again and Trance raised his shield and ran forward and he pulled his sword back and prepared to swing and in a moment he spun slightly to add more momentum to his swing. Was this sword strong enough and sharp enough to do what he needed? Slash, and he was surprised as the sword bit and cut deep into the dragon’s neck and severed the fuel lines for it’s flame unit and the gel fuel was spurting out.

The dragon was still lethal and prepared another attack. Trance sheathed his sword and he drew his ax and he ran behind a couple more columns while Axlor watched from the annex. To Axlor this couldn’t be happening. He had never witnessed anyone last this long with a castle protector dragon. He knew dragons had been destroyed before and that was always a division or two taking it on.

Behind a column near the mechanical dragon, Trance set his shield down. He would have only one chance at this and he would still have to deal with Axlor and maybe more Boulthorians. Again he pushed back the thoughts about what could happen to him, whether slain here by this dragon, Axlor, or some lucky Boulthorian knight. He readied, and then ran out and made his way to an empty plinth that was near the dragon.

The dragon was large for the area and could not turn as quickly as it could out in the open. Trance quickly leaped up on the plinth and he raised his ax, and as Axlor watched in furious surprise Trance brought his ax down on the dragon’s vulnerable head where it’s control system was. Almost instantly the dragon gave a coughing roar and shuddered before toppling over. Trance took a moment to breathe as sparks continued to emanate from its fractured head and the gel fuel started pooling.

Trance leaped down from the plinth and put his ax back in its loop on his belt as Axlor stepped out and raised his sword. He waited a moment fully expecting Axlor to come at him and end their duel now. “Father do it, end this now and let us go,” Vengethor called down.

Axlor looked up and then he turned his gaze back to his opponent and waited, “This is an impressive opponent. I have never encountered an Althorian knight or Golden Griffin with such skill. It will be an absolute pleasure to send you to your tomb.” He looked up at his son, “This is a lesson for you if ever you encounter a very skilled opponent,” and Axlor turned his burning eyes on Trance, “What pleasure do I get if I just murder or execute you? None, there is no honor in that, and I have killed many men in my life and none with as much skill and courage as you have shown. Facing me alone and then following me here and with little hope you took down a dragon, a castle protector dragon, alone. And here you stand at my power; I can taste your death, now is your chance to draw your sword and let’s finish what was started. Only through me can you leave this place.” Axlor set his shield aside and put both hands on his sword hilt.

Trance made a quick decision and took his helmet off, drew his sword, and took it with both hands as well as taking an assertive stance, “You’re mistaken again. My life is in the Lord’s hands. If it is my time then my time is up, nothing I can do to change that. Your life however, is now in my hand and you have one last chance to leave here. Not only leave this outpost, but Cator, and you might as well leave Althora. Go back home,” he waited and felt his breathing slow for a moment and he felt his muscles tense.

“Brave words but useless, I will have this planet and there will be nothing you or Maximus can do. If it is a war he wants then by war he loses his kingdom and planet,” said Axlor as he advanced and their swords clashed and clashed again.

Trance felt his arms tremble slightly, but they held as Axlor was really coming on and he knew that Axlor meant what he said, death was near. He swung his sword and caught another lethal blow and for a moment he felt and saw something that encouraged him. Axlor had a tremble also, could it be fatigue or fear. Either way maybe now he had an even chance. Clash clash went their swords and Trance took a deep breath and felt his arms hold and steady. As he swung his sword again he thought that his adrenalin was pumping again. Did he have enough and could he continue to hold out?

The swords came together multiple times as both men strove to overcome his opponent. Then Trance felt a rather powerful blow and his left hand dropped from his sword hilt and then Trance had a thought, something he had done in the past and he reached for his dagger and caught the next blow with it and turned Axlor’s sword aside. Then with both his sword and dagger he went at Axlor who now looked more surprised. This was new and Axlor growled as he came at his opponent more furiously as blow after blow was turned aside by Trance’s sword or dagger.

Trance didn’t know how much longer he could keep up, adrenalin seemed to be slowing and still battling fatigue. Then for just an instant a thought crossed his mind, the eagle head on his dagger and the feline paw on the pommel of his sword hilt, could that paw be a lion. He would have to find out later. Then the thought passed and he had to block another violent blow. Then Axlor rose up ready to cleave him and he saw his salvation and he struck and drove in his dagger. Axlor screamed in agony and now showed sudden fear and he tried to swing his sword to cleave Trance as another voice rent the air.

“Father no!” screamed Vengethor as he looked in horror for the first time and Roamer grabbed him to hold him back.

Trance brought his sword up and blocked and held Axlor’s sword and with his left hand he withdrew his dagger and thrust again and Axlor screamed again and his hold on his sword lessened and Trance knew that this was it, he had to finish him now. He almost hated what he had to do, but there was now no choice. With nearly one motion he swept Axlor’s sword aside and he drew back and drove his sword through Axlor’s armor, his heart, and through. He held Axlor up for a moment and then jerked his sword free and let him fall lifeless and above a scream ripped through the air. He looked up and saw the shocked and furious face of Vengethor looking pure hate at him. Trance took a step back from the fallen Boulthorian King as his life poured out.

“Here, I will give you long enough to get your father and leave. Just go, your presence here is at an end. You have only minutes, this is probably stupid of me, but you should take him home and bury him, entomb him, or whatever you want,” Trance said coolly looking at those hate filled eyes. Without looking away he sheathed his dagger and then standing to his full height, “You have my word, you have just minutes, now get going,” and he turned and looked down and suddenly felt a compulsion and picked up Axlor’s sword and put it in his belt and with his sword in hand he retrieved his shield and stalked back to the door and into the outpost. Behind him he heard Vengethor and Roamer come down a set of stairs.

Trance was now feeling more fatigued as he strode through the halls. One unfortunate Boulthorian knight came after him and with a few swift strokes Trance left him lifeless. All of this death, how were his friends. Had any of them been killed, he prayed not. He also took a moment to pray for their safety and forgiveness. He pushed himself on and kept his feet moving. He was surprised that the sounds of battle were less and he was taken by surprise as he entered the main entrance area and looked at a vast army of Althorian knights and pawns swiftly driving the remaining Boulthorians.

“Captain Trance,” said the captain that had spoken to Corena, “We are here at your command. What are your orders?”

Trance looked at his chron, did Vengethor have enough time, and he decided he would give another minute. He looked up at the captain and said, “We need to secure this outpost, take prisoners if we can, and any that take off, let them leave. They can report our mercy or whatever they want to say. But they will know that we defeated them here today and that we are not going to stand for their raids or assaults any longer.” Then he felt his knees tremble and the captain summoned two of his troops to assist Trance out of the building. Then without warning there was an eruption and fiery explosion that knocked him to the ground.

Most of the damage was contained to the empty courtyard as the dragon’s gel fuel got to the sparking head and it blew. Only two unfortunate Boulthorian knights were killed when it exploded. And while Trance was being helped again to his feet and rushed to the nearest medical wagon and Corena’s waiting arms two men were carrying a third on a litter made of a Boulthorian shield and then placed in a wagon that was surrounded by a group of Boulthorian knights on their warhorses and the next moment they rode north. Vengethor looked back and swore revenge on the Golden Griffin with the main less lion on his green surcoat.

Unseen and now flying to the west was a lone hawk.

Epilogue

It was a busy week after the rescue of Princess Corena. Knights, pawns and Golden Griffins of Cator retook the Boulthorian outpost. After the dragon had exploded and Trance was knocked to the ground he was helped up and taken to the nearest medical wagon and had his injuries and wounds tended to. Most of them he didn’t really know he had received until he took off his armor. While he tried to insist that they take care of the other wounded first Corena came in and took over, “They are already busy tending to the other wounded,” and she pointed her finger at him, “You Captain Trance will lay there and let them take a look at you and patch you up.”

Trance saw no argument in her eyes and layback on the examining bed, “Yes my lady,” and he let the medics examine his wounds and in minutes they were cleaned and patched up. While he lay there Corena pulled up the rooms kytherum and made a number of calls, to the palace, Trances family, to the Golden Lynx headquarters requesting a change of clothes for the division, and to Pikes Head.

Patched up Trance dressed only to his mail and left the rest of his armor for later. He strapped his sword belt on and stepped out of the wagon with Corena and once outside she looked at him and grabbed him in an embrace and just held him to her, “Thank you. I don’t know what they wanted. I don’t think they had time to tell me anything. Right after I arrived they just rushed me down to that cell.” She pulled him closer and kissed him and then pulled back and noticed his sword. Her head cocked and she commented, “That isn’t your regular sword, where did it come from.”

Trance took a moment and told her the story of how he found it and as he did he drew it out to show her. He noticed that there was still blood drying on the blade and he looked around and found a cloth nearby and cleaned it off, he would do a better job tomorrow. Corena took in the pommel and crosspiece and then she took in the blade with its etching and she suddenly shuddered. “That is an amazing sword. Trance, I think you better hang on to it. I think I need to check on something, in the meantime I am so glad you came,” and she kissed him again.

Trance and the other captains were busy the next day examining the outpost, inspecting the damage done by the exploding dragon, and checking on the wounded. Then there were the notices to go out to the families of the fallen. Trance mourned the loss of almost a third of his division. He would have to replace them and after sending his heartfelt notices he looked at graduates from the Grindstone.

Then after visiting the wounded, Zam being the most serious, he made a lengthy call to his family. This time a flood of grateful tears flowed down his mother’s face as she talked with him. He did his best to calm her, and just told her the basics of rescuing Corena. He learned about Corena’s call to them and he caught a strange gleam in his mother’s eye as she talked about the princess. Oh my, I wonder if Corena had said something about that ring. He would have to find out later. Like usual he then talked to his dad, who was very proud of him, and then Sammy and Heather.

After he finally disconnected he had a thought and called the Markems. Mrs. Markem answered and acted almost exactly like his mother. Trance talked to all of them in turn to get their news, they were all busy with schoolwork and school, Martin and Martina were preparing to go to the University and Margaretta was still reading the Doctor Renain books and taking notes. Trance laughed and shook his head. He wondered what Margaretta would think of the novel that apparently he and Corena had inspired. He chuckled at the thought as they disconnected.

Two days later King Maximus and several dignitaries and families arrived and Maximus oversaw a memorial service for the fallen Golden Griffins, knights, and pawns. The Sondersons were there and Trance’s mother took the first opportunity she had to embrace him and held him like she would never let him go. Then with delight she talked to Corena and the royal family. King Maximus invited them to a special dinner at the outpost that was now going to be called by its once ancient name, Griffin Point.

Trance and Corena escorted his family around and talked about more pleasant topics, the ring was not mentioned, thank goodness for now. Later in his room Trance took out the key he had found and he sat looking at it wondering the same questions he had before. How old was it, what was it made of and what was it for. As he put it back where he was storing it he again looked at Axlor’s sword. He still didn’t know why he took it, he already had two swords and most of the time he carried the new sword with him. Yet he looked closer this time and was surprised.

It was a two handed long sword and the blade seemed too similar to his sword and had etching also, however, he still didn’t know what it meant. He was surprised that as he looked at the round pommel he expected to see a skull or dragon but instead it had a falcon’s head carved on it. The upswept crosspiece was carved and etched like wings possibly. This was very strange he thought as he set the sword aside. I’ll have to learn more about it later and he will lay down to sleep.

His family had breakfast the next morning with him and Corena, King Maximus and Queen Kayna and Prince Mixim were in the royal coach and heading back to the palace under an armed escort. The news had gone out on what the Boulthorians had done and that the Boulthorians had declared war on the kingdom of Cator on the planet Althora. Maximus had been busy taking calls from dignitaries from the other kingdoms on the planet and from other friendly planets. No signals came from Boulthora except to their remaining four main outposts and seventeen smaller locations around Cator.

Corena called for silence in the dining hall and stood, “This is not usual protocol, but I have an announcement. Bear would you please come here,” Bear stood and approached with a small box in his hand. Trance wondered what she was up to and sat politely. “As the royal princess and a captain of the Lady Golden Griffins I have the rare pleasure of presenting and promoting Trance Sonderson to the rank of Major.”

Trance looked at his parents and tears came down as he heard the applause from his division and the gathered knights, pawns and other Golden Griffins. “No,” he said weakly, “I don’t deserve this.”

“Yes you do, and stand up,” Corena said and she reached out and removed his captain’s badge and handed it to Eileen Sonderson and took the majors badge and attached it to his surcoat that had been repaired and cleaned. The mountain lion seemed to gleam. Then from across the room a knight called.

“Captain, uh, Major Trance, there is a call for you. It is King Maximus,” he said and Trance left his seat and went to the room’s kytherum and saw King Maximus looking at him from the coach.

“Major Trance, I know you are still stunned at your promotion and having a good time with your family, however, I just got a call from my brother King Ivous from Dalvor. There seems to be some trouble there and I need you and your division to leave tomorrow for Dalvor to investigate what is going on. It seems that the Boulthorians are exploring and taking over a small rook there. I don’t have any more details at the moment. I will call you tomorrow and give you more details on where you are heading and whom you’ll meet at the border. Thank you,” and he disconnected.

Trance stood stunned and looked at his new badge. He took one of his deep breaths and went back to his friends and family. Hopefully we can enjoy the rest of this day, and he put on a smile.

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Two hooded figures stood together in an inner chamber at the palace; actually it was in the headquarters of the Golden Lynx Golden Griffin division. “Do you think they found it at Griffin Point?” asked one of the figures in the dim inner room.

“I don’t know. We will find out soon though. If it is and recovered that would be the fulfillment of another prophecy. Events are moving forward,” said the other figure.

“Do you think Faylor is correct, could the lion that found the sword be the one we have been looking for,” the first figure asked.

“I am now inclined to think that he is. We will know for sure soon. Just as we arrived I learned that he had been summoned north. If he finds what is hidden there we shall surely know.”

“What about the eagle and the bat and the Griffin and the dragon. Have they been fulfilled?” he asked not knowing there was something more.

“I don’t know yet. Remember we have already learned about the lion and the serpent. It could be that those have happened also. There is a meeting being scheduled and we may learn more then. We must be prepared for what we learn. If it is him then he will need our assistance.”

“Do we reveal ourselves to him then,” the first figure asked excitedly.

“No, the time isn’t right. We must follow the prophecies and let them happen naturally, even those that are disturbing to us. We must not force circumstances to fit. Like a double sided puzzle we must look at them carefully and select the right one to finish the picture,” said the other figure.

“Do you think the one Faylor is watching knows or suspects what he is?”

“It appears that he does not. We know that there is one that believes that he is the one, but I do not believe he is. I have observed him and he is arrogant and has a thirst for power and there is something else, there is something, what is the word, unsavory about him. Maybe we shall learn more,” then looking down at the Petihariam, “If we are right and we truly learn of him he will need to see this better and then its secret will be revealed.”

The other hooded figure nodded and looked down on the miniature pyramid temple. It was too dim to see right now, but he had looked at the miniature with enough light at times to see the markings of stars and planets. Yet it was always curious that it didn’t seem complete, there was something missing on the top. He had always wondered why it wasn’t complete, or was it and it was another clue. Often he suspected that his companion knew and was either waiting for him to ask, or maybe he didn’t know either. He looked and his fellow was looking at the model also.

Then the second figure looked up and said politely, “I don’t know, yes, I suspect I know what you were thinking and I don’t know the answer. When I came with my mentor in my youth I had wondered about this model many times and I didn’t ever ask either. I will always answer questions,” he shrugged slightly, “Sometimes though I might not know the answer. Perhaps we will learn the answer to this puzzle together. For now let us go, we have other places to oversee. We have just started down the path; there may be curves and rocky places along the way and there may be tempting side roads, but we must follow the true road that leads to redemption and salvation,” and he turned and led the way to a hidden door and they exited and the door locked behind them, the main door remained locked and undisturbed.

As the room and the Petihariam sat silent hiding it’s secret, far to the north and west a lone hawk descended toward a peculiar peak in the Crown Mountains.