

Chapter Two

Slowly the man moved his immense bulk about Royal Market Square. Not only his size set him apart from the people in the market, but he wore an outlandish lime-coloured robe trimmed with bands of orange that swept the ground as he passed. The vestment swaddled his huge gut and made his head seem small in comparison, giving him the semblance of a giant tick gorged on too much blood. As if that did not set him enough apart from the typical Thryll man - who preferred to wear a broad brimmed leather hat, a fine white blouse and dark, baggy trousers - he wore a tiara of gleaming red stones and carried an indigo parasol. The sleeve of the robe on the arm carrying the parasol hung around his elbow, revealing a pair of solid gold bracelets. The man did not so much walk as waddle, but he waddled with an air of intense arrogance. He had no qualms of pushing through the crowd, casting people from his path like reeds on a marshy trail. If anyone took offence, the man's bodyguards nudged closer and ensured that nothing came to pass. The swath they ploughed through the square's multitude of people caught the attention of many an eye, but none quite so keen as the blue eyes of the Red Fox.

The Red Fox was not a fox at all, of course, but a man. He claimed that he had taken the name so long ago that he had forgotten why. Oft he mused that those around him had dreamt up the name in reference to the crimson clothing he wore. In truth, the name had simply seemed apt for one so slight of build, lithe of body and sharp of mind. Like a fox, he preyed upon the small of stature, though Fox equated stature with wit. He therefore considered the vast majority of people he met potential prey. Unlike his namesake, however, the Red Fox preferred the thriving

mass of the city to the serenity of the wilderness. Abundance of prey had attracted him to Prallyn some years earlier and now he spoke Thryll with the same lilting tones as a native.

As if to confirm the city's never-ending bounty, the large man had entered the largest market square in Thrylland - a huge place that could hold hundreds of stalls - just after Fox had settled down on an obscure balcony offering a good viewpoint. Fox always took great care to remain hidden from view. Had a particularly keen eye looked among the balcony's creeping vines, it would have beheld a swarthy, red-maned rake who, despite the vast sums spent on his appearance, still managed to look unkempt and scruffy. Fox was not unpleasant to look at in any way, yet he always gave the impression he had just fled a scuffle. In fact, in many ways he considered life a never-ending scuffle, full of amusement, opportunities, pitfalls and cunning adversaries.

While Fox observed the large man in garish robes pushing through the market, a sudden memory came to him. He thought back to his native Florian Isles far across the Southern Sea to another day filled with garish robes - to a day that had marked him for the rest of his life. He remembered seeing a tall, noble lady, accompanied by her consort, stroll among another crowd amid wild cheers and cries of joy. Both lord and lady had donned the green ceremonial robes adorned with white rings; the colour of rebirth and the symbol of renewal and continuity. The flush of happiness had settled on the woman's face while pride had filled the man's. The woman cradled in her arms a new-born that squawked to the world. From an upstairs window of one of the narrow, elegant houses that overlooked the street, the man who would become the Red Fox had taken care to study every detail of the babe destined to hold the Orb of Nar-Renlassa.

Blood. He had turned away from the pathetic display and had looked one last time at the body on the bed. There, her own blood stilled, lay his sister. Her face and hands had the colour of mortar - stone grey and unforgiving - but the rest of her body was wrapped in a purple death shroud and decorated at the hem with golden crossed swords that noted a Council Defender, a citizen skilled both in the use of weapons and the art of battle who would sit on councils of war in times of strife. The hands of the dead woman lay on her breast, clasping the hilt of a sword that stabbed down past her feet towards the bed's baseboard.

The little crossed swords had galled him at the time; a concession from a group of people who thought they could buy off his thirst for justice. His sister had certainly shown the promise of a Council Defender, but she had not won a seat on that council by the time of her death. None of her peers had ever matched her skill with the bow. She had built a fierce reputation at games of strategy. Her grasp of military theory had been keen and her capacity to retain the slightest detail had stunned elders on the council. Nothing, though, had matched her dedication. She had craved the chance to serve her people. So she had pushed herself more, worked a little harder, studied a little longer, practised a little more often than her rivals, all in the hopes of earning a seat around the table headed by a man who had won his seat through birth.

Then, a few days earlier, she had resolved to improve her weakest martial skill - the cutlass. Despite her misgivings - she had spoken of them with only her younger brother - she had invited her closest rival to practice with her. The man, a powerful lord's son whose vanity was only surpassed by his ambition, had gone with her to a clearing in the forest. He later returned to the city carrying her in his arms. She had slipped and fallen, he said, and had not parried a simple

thrust to her chest. The wound had been fatal, he explained, and he had been powerless to prevent her soul slipping from her fallen body.

For three days following his sister's death, the Red Fox had ignored his own duties and made arrangements for an internment. He had also called for an investigation into the incident, to no effect - the man had very powerful friends who could cause a great deal of trouble for the kingdom, while the young woman had no family of any political importance whatsoever. The Council of Justice decided that nothing would be gained by calling the man's honour into question by launching an enquiry. Those sages, chosen on the basis of their wisdom, might have decided differently had they known the skills of the young woman's brother, but the members of the Council of Shadows were all sworn to secrecy and even most of *them* had no idea about the kingdom's darkest investigations.

The Red Fox had turned away from the sight of the lord and lady that day. He had left that room, left the house and walked to the river. While the jubilant crowd had followed the procession down to the Bowl of Souls to greet the royal child, the Red Fox had followed the river's gentle current out of town. The royal child had, by force of birth, received all the best wishes and privileges that a society could bestow. The Red Fox had resolved to leave the islands forever.

But he had done something terrible before he left.

Noise pierced the Red Fox's reverie; the market's bustling sounds intruded. He again spotted the obese man in the gaudy robes pushing people from his path. Fox studied the man's every arrogant movement along two rows of market stalls. He noted each article of clothing and each decorative frill the man wore, from the golden bracelets to the gleaming tiara. He noticed

every purchase the man made, from the soap sculpture of a lion to the bottle of Laran perfume. Finally Fox looked about for any dangers such as the City Guard, Florian assassins, or, Neckrar and Ilynik, the most fearsome duo of domestic killers. Finally he slipped from the balcony and melted into the crowd; one small, blood-red shape flowing through the arteries of the market.

Confident in his ignorance, the fat man rounded the end of a row of stalls, barged past some grumbling merchants and moved along another row. A small man, bent low to fasten his sandals, blocked the path. Without thought, the fat man pushed on, knocking the unfortunate wretch to the cobblestones. The crumpling figure flung up his arms to protect his head, then lay curled on the cobbles until the entourage passed. A merchant woman from an adjacent stall came over and helped the small man to his feet. With an angry voice she asked, “Are you right? That damned pig should take more care! Blasted nobles think they’re the lords of creation.”

The Red Fox grinned back at her and replied with a cautious glance over his shoulder, “I feel fine woman.” He opened a pink leather pouch, produced a silver piece and handed it to the shocked woman. “For your troubles,” he said, before disappearing into the throngs of shoppers. As he moved from Royal Market Square onto New Nettle Row, he pulled another silver from the pouch and stuffed it into his trouser pocket. Then, as he passed a blind beggar woman sitting at the side of the street, he dropped the noble’s pouch into her lap.

The blind woman weighed the prize and called out, “May the Seven bless your soul, my Lord.”

The Red Fox glanced about quickly to make sure that no Ecclesiastical Guard were within earshot and retorted over his shoulder, “If your Gods *do* exist, they would never bless a cursed soul such as mine.” Despite his words, Fox trotted off feeling happy. Happy because

someone born into power and fortune would pay for his evening on the town. Above all, happy because someone who dressed so badly deserved such misfortune.

Of course the purse was warded, as the Red Fox had suspected. The Prallyn Guard found it on the blind beggar shortly afterwards and paid no heed to her story. She was never seen on New Nettle Row again.



“What’s this word here?” the dark-haired woman asked.

“That’s . . . ah . . . that’s . . . re . . . reek . . . kerd. Rekerd,” replied the boy.

The woman smiled and said, “Not quite. It’s Rekrid. He’s our God of Strength. He defends believers of the Guardian Church from their enemies.”

“I know who he is!” the bright-eyed boy assured the woman. “He’s the warrior God with his javelin.”

Again the woman smiled. “That’s right. Now, what about this one here,” she said, pointing to another word in the thick book that lay on the table at which they sat. Though the boy did not notice, the woman stifled a yawn and rubbed her stinging eyes - grey eyes with puffy bags underneath that made her look older than her thirty years.

“Protectors.”

“Now read the whole paragraph,” instructed the woman.

“Ah,” the boy stammered before beginning. ““And the Seven Gods sat upon they . . . their seven thrones. Throns, God of Light and Life, sat at their head and wept, for Cha . . . Cha . . . oh . . . se would cons . . . ume many mortal souls.’ ” The woman took care to grimace only when the boy’s concentration was fixed solidly upon the text. She shook her head as he continued, ““Then Risitha the Moon Mother, the God of Wisdom spoke and said, “Verily many shall tum, tum . . . ble into the abbey . . . sis unless We act as their Protectors an’ hold the end of the world at bay.” And those she took the man tell of Queen of Hope fer her self. Ree . . . Rekrid stood upon his ped . . . es . . . tell and cried, “Ye . . . ah Our Moon Mother speaks true,” and he held aloef his javelin and challenged the Chaohse.’ ”

The woman patted the boy’s back and said, “That was better but you’ve still some problems with a couple of words. Try this word again.”

“Chaohse.”

“You don’t know what that is, do you?” asked the woman. The boy looked up and slowly shook his head.

“That says chaos,” said the woman. “Now listen to me read it:

“ ‘And the Seven Gods sat upon their seven thrones. Throns, God of Light and Life, sat at their head and wept, for Chaos would consume many mortal souls. Then Risitha the Moon Mother, the God of Wisdom spoke and said, “Verily many shall tumble into the abyss unless We act as their Protectors and hold the end of the world at bay.” And thus she took the mantle of Queen of Hope for herself. Rekrid stood upon his pedestal and cried “Yea, Our Moon

*Mother speaks true,” and he held aloft his javelin and challenged
the Chaos.’*

“Now, doesn’t that sound just like Watch Cleric Yarman on the Day of Worship? This text speaks of the strong foundation of faith on which the Guardian Church is built. Rekrid assures us that the Seven will protect us from the Chaos that would otherwise bring an end to the world.”

Just then the violent sound of coughing interrupted the tutorial. A worried look seized the woman’s face as she sprang from her chair and crossed the small room to a narrow bed set against the far wall. There, wrapped under covers, lay a small child whose bent form shuddered from the rasping fits of coughing. Her small face was wan and pale except for the red sores that dotted her complexion. Listless eyes looked up at the woman, who sat down on the edge of the bed and who ran a caring hand along the child’s jaw line. The coughs continued until the woman pulled the child into a sitting position and poured several spoonfuls of an elixir down the youngster’s throat. “There, there,” the woman counselled. “It’s all right my love. It’s all right.”

The child looked up and croaked out a few feeble words, “I’m hot, mama.”

“I know, my love,” replied the woman, “I know.” The child closed her eyes while her mother reached for a ragged cloth that floated in a bucket of water at the foot of the bed. Taking the cloth, the woman dabbed the child’s forehead. Vainly she tried to get her child to eat some cornmeal porridge but the little girl held nothing down.

Finally, when the child returned to a fitful, feverish sleep, and when her mother had cleaned up the mess on the bed, the young boy’s lesson continued. They had not long returned to the religious texts when the boy looked up at his tutor and asked, “Miss Saradin, I know the God

Rekrid's supposed to protect us from our enemies but don't we also have Keldain to protect us from being sick?"

The woman offered a hollow smile and replied, "Yes. She protects and heals us."

The boy tilted his head and asked, "So why's Fannia sick then? Why doesn't Keldain just make her better?"

Through welling tears that she struggled to contain, the woman called Saradin replied, "I don't know, Jost. I just don't know."

"Have you not spoken to the watch cleric? He's supposed to look after us all here in his watch on behalf of the Gods, isn't he?"

"He does, and I have," she replied. "But it hasn't done any good yet."



Throughout the hallway, the clacking of the men's boots rang off the citadel's stone walls. They were both around forty and comported themselves with an unconcerned confidence, as men who have made successes of themselves often do. The sound matched their demeanour as they strode like the Gods through the most important building in the realm. Over their fine garments, and in spite of the thick, heavy heat that squeezed the life out of the city, both men wore long cloaks - one a bright green, the other a royal purple - that billowed out behind them as they swept along the corridors. Together they passed the kitchen, the scullery and marched up a winding stairwell that led to the castle's living quarters three floors up. They moved between the

apartments of lesser figures and finally came to a larger portal adorned with the seal of the Personal Secretary to the King of Thrylland. The taller man - the one with pointy rat-like features including wiry, rust coloured hair that hung down to his shoulders - pulled a key from his pocket, unlocked the door and led the short, blond man into the bright room within. A short time later they had shed their cloaks and installed themselves in well-cushioned chairs with goblets of chilled wine cradled in their hands.

“You’re still making improvements to your apartments, I see,” commented the blond man as he looked about.

“Indeed I am, Baron Greenshield,” replied the second man. He pulled a shiny coin from his pocket and gave it a flick into the air. Once it had landed in his palm, he smiled a crooked smile, flicked the coin again and said, “I’m not worried about upgrading it and then losing my investment. I intend to keep this apartment for a good long time yet.”

“As I’m sure you will if you continue serving Jerryn so well. Mmm!” exclaimed the Baron. “Your wine is most delicious.”

“Thank you,” replied the King’s secretary with a smile. Again he sent the coin spinning into the air and when it descended, it bounced off his hand and fell clattering to the stone floor. The man bent over and reached for his cherished toy before continuing, “It comes from a pretty little vineyard by the Cape. I try to maintain a steady supply although it is at times quite difficult. In fact, I would give *you* more business if your ships went down that way more often.”

“They may just. I shall soon be freeing my personal corvette for more Laran commerce. It would have to round the Cape often.”

“Good!” the King’s Secretary replied. Then, as an afterthought he added, “But, Laran’s quite a ways away. Would that not restrict your personal travels?”

“Not at all, Yuin. I have commissioned a galleon. She shall soon be ready.”

“A galleon?”

“Yes, I commissioned one when we first began our discussions about my entering the nobility three years ago. Every noble worth his salt has a grand ship. How could I be any different? When she’s ready - soon by all accounts - she’ll be the best in her class. In fact, only the galleons of the Royal Navy will be better. I’ll fly my new banner, thanks to you, and have everyone wondering what’s afoot!”

The King’s Secretary nodded before observing, “I look forward to sailing on her.”

They exchanged pleasantries for the rest of the afternoon and only when they emerged into the last rays of the sun that caressed the secretary’s balcony did they turn their attention to the business that preoccupied them both. They stood together at the stone rampart, leaning out over the edge of the building and watching the sun set behind the Encircling Hills. The sounds of the city wafted up to them - clacking hooves, crying babes, shouting merchants. Together they sighed at the retreat of the heat’s full force and they let their eyes touch the shimmering waters of Fortune Bay’s East Arm. “Have you made any progress with the King?” asked Baron Greenshield.

“Some,” replied the secretary. “You must understand that this is an extremely delicate subject. He is loathe to talk about it and yet it weighs upon him as would a guilty conscience. He knows that he must sooner or later take a decision one way or another.”

“Of course, Yuin, of course,” mumbled the Baron. “However, I am . . .” he cast his eyes about, searching for a delicate way of expressing his concern, “becoming anxious. We’ve been negotiating for some time now.”

“And I think that you hardly have any grounds for complaint. Your star, and that of your family, has risen startlingly over the past year.”

“Yes I know, and I’m grateful to you.” Then as an afterthought Greenshield added, “*And* to His Majesty. But, by the same measure, your own fortunes have increased markedly as well over this past year, as the state of your apartment would seem to prove.”

The secretary shifted, drew another sip from his chilled wine and turned to look south, out to sea. Finally he said, “You’ve already received royal dispensation to buy up Baron Greenshield’s estates. The King granted you the noble title of baron in light of your possessions and your unswerving support for the Crown. Your son has been granted a commission in the Royal Army. In short, your investments have been fruitful in the past. I need you to trust me now and into the future for a spell. My record on your behalf speaks for itself.”

The Baron Greenshields hung his head and replied to the secretary’s back, “Forgive me, my friend. I meant to question neither your influence nor your intent. Look upon my concerns as a query. What more can I do to help you speed things along?”

Unseen to the baron, the King’s Secretary cracked another crooked smile. However, when he turned and replied, his face held nothing but absolute sincerity. “Don’t fret, Fanneryn. I take your concerns in the manner that you intend them. As for what more can be done, well, let us say simply that I believe the King is close to deciding in your favour. All that it might take is perhaps another subtle prodding, and you will eventually see your line upon the throne.”

“Yes? Well, what can I do?”

Once more the secretary smiled sweetly and responded, “As you know Jerryn is worried about the upkeep of his estates. For reasons you can appreciate, he is loathe to approach the Assembly of Barons and request they levy another tax. They might impose restrictions on the King’s tracts or, Gods forbid, even his policies. They might also bring up the question of the succession, and *that* is a matter you would not wish them to broach.”

“Certainly not!” exclaimed the Baron. “But I hadn’t heard such things from the Adjudicator of the Assembly.”

Yuin dismissed the reference to the Adjudicator with a wave of his hand. “Naturally. The battle lines are already drawn. Everyone knows that only the succession divides the seven dukes and that if given the chance, they would combine to thwart the King’s policies. For a man who is such an overwhelmingly successful merchant, and now an important baron with aspirations of having his daughter marry the King, I am surprised that you pay such little attention to the politics of the realm.”

The baron shrugged and observed, “As with business, one must always begin in ignorance. I have just learned not to place so much faith in the Adjudicator.”

The secretary nodded before continuing, “To return to what remains for you to do . . . if you could support the upkeep of his estates through this drought, the King would eternally remember who supported him. It would cement His Majesty’s good favour.”

The baron ventured the question he had dreaded all afternoon, “How much does the King need?” The response from Yuin Bracekeep, the King’s secretary, was every bit as harrowing as Fanneryn Holltallyn, the Baron of Greenshields, had feared.



As Bracekeep and Greenshields discussed their secret designs, another figure stood in the dwindling light of eventide on another balcony in another district of the city. The robed man savoured the silence for, unlike Bracekeep's balcony perched over the bustling heart of the city, this terrace was kissed with tranquillity. It overlooked private gardens encircled by the living quarters of the huge Saint Garyn Temple of the Guardian Church. Had the structure of the temple itself not kept unwelcome clamour at bay, then the Church buildings that ringed the Guardian District would have done so, as would the parks of the Central Glades that in turn ringed that part of the city entirely devoted to Thrylland's state religion.

The figure leaned on his elbows, hunched over the carved-stone railing like a gargoyle as he allowed his eyes to follow the movements of an initiate as she silently lit the lanterns hanging from stands scattered among the shrubs and flowers. His thinning silver hair and tired demeanour hinted at an age much greater than he had yet attained as well as a burden of worries that he bore. He wore the robes of an archprelate - crimson and trimmed in gold thread in the pattern of a chain of connected seven-pointed stars - but the robes weighed heavier now than they did when he first donned similar ones over ten years earlier.

Though he watched the initiate, his eyes beheld times long past. He had made peace with the Gods many years before in his home in the Nadeem and had since served them for the better part of half a century. Like many who did their best to carve an existence out of the barren desert,

the man had devoted himself to Jerryn the Hunter, the God of seeking, of progress and, most importantly for an impoverished youth from a desert frontier town, of bounty.

The God had taken good care of his devotee, for the Church had given the Nademite much. It had assuaged his youthful, troubled soul and allowed him to find his place in the Gods' grand plan. It had given him languages; most notably Laran and Thryll. It had given him in-depth learning in theology and politics. Yet, of all that the Church had given him, Lovyn knew that the gift of the Art towered above all else. He had learned to find, control and channel arcane powers that could destroy disease, lend strength to the spoken word and strike down enemies.

Over the years, the Church had recognized his talents and given him more responsibility. He had started with missionary duty among the Karowyn. He had loved reaching out to heathens and bringing them into the light of the Seven. By twenty-four he had his own watch in the wine region of Agaryn, where he ministered to a large congregation and enjoyed success in securing funds for the Church's missionary work. Some prominent believers must have their influence on his behalf, because by thirty he found himself in charge of an abbey where he guided the work of sixty initiates as they hunted for spiritual truths. At forty he became the youngest ever Prelate of Saint Cathor of Yannok and he settled into the comfortable Loral Tower of Cape Agaryn. That office had brought him more than a stately tower, however. It also brought him an ebony throne, complete with a marble pedestal, in the Saint Garyn Temple. The Archprelate of the Iwaquirid Peninsula held Holy Audience in the Inner Temple of Saint Garyn's in Prallyn and the seven prelates each had an ebony throne in the Inner Temple. He had eventually spent more time in the Thryllish capital than in Agaryn but, like the hunter God to whom he prayed most often, he knew how to seize opportunity and in record time he had become the ninety-second Archprelate of

Iwaquirid. Lovyn of Naandri Drake realized that there was little chance of ever receiving the Grand Sentinel's invitation to become a Minister Counsellor in Laran, and he had made peace with his ambition. He had devoted himself to his archprelatic and to spreading the teachings of the Gods to the heathen folk; the Baranthu to the east, and the Altapi to the west.

While he thanked Jerryn every night for his bounty, he had of late prayed more often to Risitha for wisdom. Indeed, while the Church had given him much over the years, it demanded much in return. His fractious Inner Temple endlessly impeded his plans to proselytize, though that hardly surprised him given the predominance of Thryllish prelates. Thrylls had lived for so long in a strong kingdom that they rarely considered other lands as important. Instead, the prelates pushed him to exert greater influence on the Crown, hoping to expand the Church's considerable privileges. They bickered endlessly over whether Church powers should be centralized or devolved. The day's proceedings served as a case in point; all through the morn, the prelates had squabbled over the conduct of the Ecclesiastical Guard after the Prelate of Holydale had raised allegations of a massacre of believers in his prelatic. As ever, the seven prelates had been split with three arguing that the Guard had become unruly, three others defended it vehemently and calling the whole thing a plot by the heathen Duke of Blackabbey, while one cited the validity of both camps' arguments and then called for an inquest.

Lovyn supposed that it was normal for seven opinionated people, each a devotee of a God who represented a distinct guiding principle, to harbour bitter differences. He could always expect the Prelate of Prallyn, for example, as a disciple of Rekrud, to advocate confronting threats to the Church directly. Lovyn felt certain he could make a killing wagering on the course of action of his successor to the Looral Tower; as a disciple of Risitha, she wanted every

contentious issue examined by a commission of enquiry for months on end. Lovyn felt his prelates should make greater efforts to respect the entire pantheon that the Guardian Church embodied. At present, the prelates' single-mindedness caused him great anguish.

Then, there was the mystery that dwelt in the chamber beneath that of the False Guardians. Though his rational nature told him that there was little ground for fear, Lovyn worried endlessly that the enigma was a harbinger of some terrible doom. For the first time in his life, Lovyn felt like the hunted rather than the hunter.



Prallyn's citizens passed a hot, sticky night, many of them tossing and turning in the grip of the unnatural heat. To the disappointment of those who rose before dawn to take soap and dampened cloth to their sweating bodies, the day dawned bright and clear once again. Without respite, the heavy heat continued in a seemingly never ending stream of hazy, humid days. Two Days of Worship passed, an unprecedented four weeks, without rain or even cloud. In the lands around Thrylland's capital city, peasant farmers stared out across fields of burnt, withered shoots, and barons stared nervously out from their keeps at anxious vassals. Some minor merchants bought up what grain they could and stored it in their granaries for sale later, hoping the King would not decree a set price for a commodity sure to be rare when the pathetic harvest came in. The wiser merchants bought it up and shipped it to unremarkable warehouses in Prallyn where they hoped it would remain out of the reach of any opportunistic barons looking to save their

hides by condoning riots on local granaries. Only the Guardian Church, and specifically the Ecclesiastical Guard, took no precautions to safeguard their grain acquisitions.

However, fears of impending disaster had yet to seize the minds of the city's citizens. Some even welcomed the strange weather. One such person was, among other things, the owner of a popular public house in the Docks District. The pub, Flagan's Tavern and Free House, was now so synonymous with its owner that his other interests escaped attention, which suited the man just fine. From the confines of a study at the back of the building, he conducted a broad range of affairs ranging from religion, to history, to politics, to the study of arcane knowledge.

Flagan was not the man's name, but that of the pub's previous, late, owner. Flagan had been murdered and his will had unexpectedly passed the property on to his friend, the present owner. No one in Prallyn thought to question whether or not Charano the Bright was his true name, for he never gave any reason for people to doubt it. Charano had come to the city years before from his native Florian Isles. He embodied all the preconceived notions that Thrylls had of exotic foreigners. Swarthy, but handsome and tall, dashing and quick of wit, fair of voice and well-versed in the use of language, thin and angular with a long ponytail of dark hair tied with a short length of multi-coloured cloth, his presence dominated the pub.

Though he usually left the day-to-day operations of the tavern to his manager and the mother of his child, Martha, Charano always took time to provide a personal welcome to special guests. Yet another bright sky had struck Prallyn and through the long morning the temperature had risen steadily until it had reached an insupportable boiling arrogance. Though Flagan's lunch business shied away from the short menu, they attacked their flasks of ale with a previously unseen vigour. Martha would have called the pub's earnings "lusty" when Flagan's son arrived,

bringing his morning squad of city guard with him. Charano roused himself from one of his journals to greet Hagart and to place the private room at the squad's disposal. Preferential treatment such as this, and more than a bit of personal attention, had long since smoothed over the difficulty Hagart had in accepting that his father's will had deprived him of the premises. The private room quickly became awash in fatigue and exasperation. After the mugs of ale had been delivered, Charano pulled up an empty chair, flashed a gleaming, sympathetic smile and sat next to Hagart. "You had a difficult night watch, I take it," he said.

Hagart huffed. "Difficult? You've never heard of the word 'til you've served on the night shift, but by Gods, I'll warrant I've never had a worse night. We'll need Rekrid's strength if we're to get through another like this one."

"What is going on, my friend?" Charano asked.

"It's the damned heat! It always sets people off but now we've gone weeks without rain and we're stewing away. As surely as if we were fish lying out there on the docks, Prallyn's going rotten under this sun. Our hearts are going black as a frying pan. People are bumping into each other on the streets and drawing knives! You so much as looks the wrong way at a merchant and he'll have you run through. Was a boy stabbed this morning for annoying some baron or another. I tell you, if we don't get no rain, we're going to be cooked in more ways than one."

Together they discussed the squad's difficult morning and one by one the other guards joined in. Slowly the cloud of despondency lifted from the private room, aided by beer, cold meats and good measure of griping. When finally the room sounded with an abrupt knock and Martha stuck her head in the doorway, the squad was laughing and chatting, having survived the night's ordeals. "Charano, dear, you have a visitor," she said before disappearing again.

Charano rose to his feet and said, "Sorry gentlemen," and then bowing to the only female member of the squad, "and lady, I must take my leave. Please rest here a while." He made his way to the study and found the Red Fox standing near the back door, looking every which way like a frightened dik-dik. Charano gave his friend a puzzled look after seeing the wooden box in the short man's arms. He led Fox into the adjacent study and helped him set aside his burden. Charano then crossed to his tall chair and sat down. Fox opened the container and pulled from it two large scrolls bound with gold ribbon. He sat in the chair opposite his friend and said in the tongue of the Florian Isles, the land from which both men hailed, "I have brought these for you."

Charano smiled, reached out a long arm and took one of the documents. "What are they?"

Fox allowed himself a sly grin and replied, "Maps. In addition, there are some other documents in which I think you have some interest."

"Really?" Charano pulled the ribbon from the first. "And you found them where?"

While his friend opened the scrolls, Fox answered, "From a . . . rival. He knows nothing of their disappearance as yet, but he will thank me later."

Charano arched an eyebrow and glanced across at the Red Fox before laying out the map at his feet. "Why so?" he asked.

Fox pursed his lips and cast his nervous eyes around the study before replying, "Were my competitor to move these goods tonight as planned, he would soon see the inside of Jerryn's gaols. I think he will prefer lost goods to a lengthy stay in a dungeon with rats nibbling his toes."

Again Charano looked up from the scroll to shoot an inquisitive look at his friend.

"Hmm," he observed, "I can see why someone would take an interest in these maps. No one

followed you?” Fox shook his head and pulled his legs up underneath him. Charano narrowed his eyes and sent his guest a look that bordered upon a glare, “Would you swear it?”

“Charano!” Fox replied. “Of anyone in this city, you should know I cannot afford to forget caution. The Florian crown has agents and assassins here and it has no qualm about sending letters to Neckrar and Ilynik. Then Miss Thrynn has her legion of spies. Beside those threats, the City Guard pales in comparison.

“In any event,” he huffed, “there are few people in this world who can hide themselves from me and still follow my activities. Fewer still inhabit this Gods-forgotten city and a third of *them* are in this room! Now, *I* did not follow me. I doubt *you* did. I intercepted mail to Neckrar and Ilynik just yesterday but I have paid them well enough to keep them off me for the moment. If the other two had followed me, then I imagine some demon would already have us for slaves in the netherworld, or I would already find myself in shackles on a ship bound for home.”

Charano eased his stare and nodded slowly before returning to the documents. “You still pay Neckrar and Ilynik? Hmph. Well, I cannot say it surprises me; keep your friends close and your enemies even closer, hmm?” As he pored over the maps in detail, the Red Fox slipped from his chair and set about opening one of the bottles of wine that sat cradled in a cabinet by the door. Charano took a full goblet from the Red Fox and asked, “Tell me, where exactly would your rival have taken these documents?”

“Praylaar,” Fox replied. Charano arched a slim eyebrow. “Does that surprise you?”

Charano sat back into his regal chair, thought for a while and then finally declared, “Yes. Most people would expect the Duke of Praylaar to covet such information; details on the deployment of the King’s army. But in truth he could do little with it. If he musters his men at

arms and those of his liege lords, Rushara would do the same. Both sides are still too evenly matched and cannot threaten the King. Praylaar cannot take advantage of such information.”

“Even so,” remarked Fox, “perhaps someone in his favour could profit from it?”

Charano nodded but then asked, “If someone wanted to curry Praylaar’s favour, why then would he not pass on all the information? The maps do not show the troop locations of the Ecclesiastical Guard. The Fourth Brigade is based here in Prallyn. Anyone interested in testing Thrylland’s strength would need to know where the Fourth had deployed its units, or risk disaster on the battlefield.”

Fox shrugged and responded, “I know little of such things except that the Church guards its secrets closely. I thought only its reserve unit and its cavalry remained close to home. Besides, who would the Ecclesiastical Guard support? Would they aid Jerryyn or those who opposed him? Perhaps the cartographer has discounted the Guardian Church as either an ally or an enemy?”

“Mmm,” replied the tall man. “Perhaps. I shall place some enquiries. Thank you Fox. You have at very least provided me with an interesting enigma. What can I offer you in return?”

The Red Fox smiled his patented nervous grin before remarking, “You need offer nothing. Consider it a simple gesture of friendship.”

“Come now, Fox. This is highly important military intelligence. So important, in fact, that despite your assurances, I shall carefully observe the movements of those behind me for the next while! It merits a gesture in return.” Charano said, rather than asked, “Surely I can entice you with something . . .”

Again Fox cracked an anxious smile before replying, “Well . . . could you get me an appointment with the Market District Councillor?”

“Fox!” cried Charano in mock surprise. “Are you taking your dark business into a new stratum of Prallyn society?”

“The thought had occurred to me,” Fox admitted. “You know all these people intimately. Perhaps you could slip in a kind word in my favour?”

Charano smiled a long, expansive smile and said, “I shall see what I can do on your behalf. Come back tomorrow.”



A single hoof stamped. The horse's footfall shot through the air like a baboon's bark. The chill silence that followed sang like a dirge to what pre-dawn light hovered over the mountain glen. As the break in the damp, cold, clinging mist wafted near, it revealed his line of dark figures lying behind a short, broken wall of stones. Black helmets bobbed; large heads encased in rough, aging metal shifted and moved in rippling tides of controlled tension until the mist consumed them. Mighty arms pressed against the hard ground underneath each prostrate figure, waiting to heave hidden, battle-ready frames into action. A faint smell of oil roamed through the droplets hanging in the air like innumerable corpses from thousands of invisible gibbets and invaded the chieftain's nose.

Across the waste, a single rider emerged from the wet cloud like the spirit of death atop her demonic steed. Another hard hoof beat repeated the baboon bark, suddenly accompanied by the muffled complaint of steel on flint near at hand. A quick spurt of light and then the cloth

wrapped about the tip of the long spear gave a gleeful hiss as fire crawled over the damp material. The warrior with the brand held the flame low, close to the rocky ground, where it could not give away their position. Behind the lone, darkly-angelic figure, a second rider congealed from the mist. Then two more.

Finally the black, twisted feeling revealed itself. It cast aside its camouflage, a heavy cloak of pre-battle anxiety, and became that awful pounding sensation of foreboding. Nearby, a steely Altapi face, lit by the burning cloth, turned and sent a questioning glance at the young chieftain, Ruknor. Ignoring his warrior's question, Ruknor confronted his foreboding deep inside his panicked mind. As he did so, a jagged line of cavalry, huddled under woolen capes, emerged from behind the four cautious forms already in view across the waste. Each silhouette, features yet hidden in the shadows of cloud and pre-dawn, held a long pike high in the air. Resisting the visible will of his lieutenants, the chieftain kept his large, leathery hand open. He heard the old warrior, Magaar, shift in uncomprehending discomfort behind him; the time had come to clench the fist, to send forth the savage attack. Previous such attacks had met success and convinced a wild nation of disparate tribes into grudging unity, but now the hand remained open while the chieftain peered into the inky heart of his unease.

Disaster. Always disaster rode shortly behind his foreboding. He cast his eyes about, looking for whatever in this ambush could bring stark ruin in its wake.

His lines lay hidden from view. His enemy approached with pikes held high, not levelled and ready to face an attack. Towering walls of stone guarded his flanks. The terrain between his lines and his enemy held little to impede a short burst of speed across the waste. He turned his head and looked past Magaar, who, judging from his look, sensed that some skirmish that would

determine the outcome of the upcoming battle was already underway. To the rear, up the canyon floor, for as far as the mist would allow the chieftain's vision to carry, not a creature moved.

Long had the Altapi chief gone without feeling the agonizing presence of this sadistic companion. The foreboding had accompanied every disastrous experience in his life, every painful failure. The foreboding, a precursor to the stark anguish of futility, was an unwelcome guest. The chieftain scorned the rough, imprecise feeling in his mind and turned back to face the slowly approaching forms. Then suddenly, the foreboding transformed into a furious hammer that pounded again and again into his guts.

The image of the leading figures across the waste sharpened as the mist lifted from the valley floor. If he were ever to give the order to charge, the chieftain realized, he would need to do so now or risk losing the shock of surprise. He looked down upon the face of the man glowing in the sheltered light of the flaming brand and slowly clenched his hand into a fist. The warrior rose, planted his broad, flat feet, readied his muscled arm and let fly the brand of battle.

The small flaming fireball arched through the air. For the briefest of moments it hung there, then the foreboding shattered into a clear vision of falling death. Archers!

Before the spear dropped to the earth leaving in its wake a dark, smoky stain against the grey dawn sky, the line of Altapi heaved up and forward. A thunderous, terrifying cry sounded from the throats of two hundred flesh-hungry warriors, a cry that drowned the desperate warning of their leader. Two hundred hands hefted axes and clubs aloft while the chieftain bounded after his armoured legion. The chieftain, however, could not catch the surging wall. Even the oldest warrior, Magaar, outpaced his short leader.

Ahead, the Thrylls sprang their trap. Foot soldiers emerged from behind the cavalry, took the long pikes from the riders and set them in a barrier of terrible, jagged teeth. The riders closed their ranks behind the protective shield. More footmen, dreaded, deadly archers, moved from the mist and into position behind their pike-wielding comrades. Though the Altapi chieftain could not hear over the shouting of his troops, he could see a mounted commander behind the archers with a long, curving sabre held high in the air. One long, last, vain cry escaped the chieftain's lungs before the Thryll commander sliced down with his sabre. A cloud of arrows shot forth and then dropped in a deadly rain of agony upon the charging Altapi. Not a single set of heavy, muscled legs gave way beneath the weight of the first onslaught. The chieftain saw his men continue their desperate dash across the waste. Then the second wave fell from the sky, then the third. Of the two hundred warriors under the chieftain's command, only four score reached the waiting pikes and those men had suffered so severely under the hail of arrows they failed to break through the line of jabbing pain. Forty more Altapi fell before a single Thryllish skull caved-in under the blow of an Altapi club. For a fleeting moment, the certainty of defeat faltered. The pikemen fell back and the remaining warriors pressed forward. But then the cavalry finally charged, and when they did, they laughed in mocking delight as their sweeping swords reaped a harvest of warm blood.

Much later, when the protective shroud of night had again fallen on the waste, the young chieftain pulled himself to his feet and emerged from his hiding place; a deep, dank cave a short way up the valley from the scene of the carnage. Ever so slowly he plodded, driven by his grief, anger and shame, down the game trail to the burnt mound in the middle of the narrow canyon. There he sat down in front of the remnants of two hundred corpses lying among faintly glowing

cinders and charred pieces of armour. He recognized nothing of the men that he had assembled in the dead of night one night now past. As always, the Thrylls, in their depraved barbarity, had hewn the heads from the dead to stick atop their pikes and to put on display above their stone gates; effigies meant to gratify a race of people without honour.

At length the chieftain noticed the burnt remains of the charm he had given Magaar, his old comrade and counsellor, in return for a magical talisman Ruknor now wore around his neck. Only then did he pull the arrows from his own body, setting each down in front of him; three instruments of death that had weakened his charge. Three long thorns that had prevented him from rallying his men and fighting the good fight. Never again would he be so incapacitated. Three promises he made before the Gods of the Solar Temple and the Lunar Circle. He pondered each arrow in turn. He would snap the first when he conquered his *skanslaart*, his curse. He would snap the second upon rejoining his people. He would snap the last when he exacted his revenge; once he silenced that mocking laughter and taught the world to respect his people.

When his bleeding finally stopped near morning, the man shuffled from the mouth of the valley and followed the path that led to the east; the same path taken by the Thryll soldiers late the previous day.