

CORANOX

DETERRENT



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Jane Shelton



Jane Shelton, captain of the 39th Company, watched from atop a small hill as the last sliver of Helistos vanished behind the massive façade of Aldova Fortress. The light from the sun continued to paint the sky in various shades of pink and red, and thousands of solistones filling Lake Sanmoria and the fortress began to glow softly, giving Shelton a clear view of the lake and the surrounding areas. Having led her current patrol for several days, she had come to realize that Aldova was even easier to observe closely at night.

“No sign of the enemy, Captain.”

She turned to face the young, blond sergeant who had addressed her. An awkward smile spread across his face, but Shelton did not return it. She was generally not an expressive woman, and she was especially hesitant to smile, as she was conscious of the scar which carved through her upper lip.

“Helistos has not yet set, Sergeant Baldwin,” she said. “The greatest obstacle for a soldier isn’t lack of ability, it’s complacency.”

She patted him gingerly on the shoulder.

“Come now,” she said. “We have a long night ahead of us.”

Shelton strode down the hill. Baldwin and eighteen other soldiers from her company trailed behind her. The men were in various stage of wakefulness; many had difficulty sleeping during the daylight hours. Five days of uneventful night patrol, after the recent increased defensive measures ordered by the senior Coranthian general, Leopold San Mortigan, had made them weary and inattentive. While the men dutifully followed Shelton’s orders, she knew that some believed the patrols were a waste of time.

They traveled east on their usual route. By the time they reached the far recesses of the Sanmorian Highlands, well over two arcs had passed.

“Stop,” Shelton said, drawing to a sudden halt. She motioned for her troops to stay behind her. Her gaze fixed upon an expanse of plains to the east, where tiny dots of light floated in the infinite black night.

Fires, she thought. Most likely from torches.

“What is it, Captain?” a soldier asked uneasily. Shelton’s silence seemed to unnerve her troops.

“Baldwin, Patterson, come here,” Shelton said.

Two young sergeants stepped forward.

“Look there,” she said, pointing. “Do you see that?”

The sergeants looked eastward.

“Torches,” Patterson said softly, brushing stray hair strands out of her eyes. “Definitely torches. What are your orders?”

Instead of replying, Shelton turned to face the rest of the patrol.

“There’s a high probability that an enemy force is marching from the east, headed in our direction. I don’t wish to take any chances.”

“What about their intent, Captain?” Baldwin asked.

“These are enemy warriors. Their intent is quite clear,” said Patterson.

“Is it? All I see is a group of torches in the distance headed our way,” Baldwin said.

“Baldwin is right,” Shelton said. “We should act only on the information we have.”

She scanned the horizon. There were no other signs of light. The torchbearers were advancing over open terrain which offered no cover. To gain a terrain advantage, Shelton’s patrol would need to retreat to the hills they had passed through almost half an arc ago.

“We will head back towards Aldova. Once we have a better vantage point, we will assess the situation more thoroughly. Patterson and Baldwin, find the other scouts and inform them of the change in plan. We will stay here for twenty reps, then move west. If you are late, retrace our path to find us.”

The two sergeants nodded and embarked on their task. A quarter arc later, they returned with the remaining members of Shelton’s patrol.

“Good, we’re all here,” said Shelton. She began to lead the group west. “Use only single solistone chambers for lighting. We have to allow them to come closer while avoiding detection.”

The patrol crept west for the next half arc. Though the unidentified group drew closer, Shelton was unable to estimate its size. She could clearly see only six individual torches, but if there were more, they were hidden in the shadows. Once Shelton and her soldiers reached the hills, she ordered her troops to halt upon reaching the tallest crest.

“We’ll wait here and find out what we’re dealing with,” Shelton said.

The soldiers positioned themselves to obtain a clear view of the eastern plains. After some time passed, Shelton became aware of the nervous whispering among her patrol. Their uneasiness was infectious. She knew almost all of them to be new recruits, without the experience of participating in the recent major battles. She could not be certain how many of them truly understood the danger of their situation. Additionally, her gaze had remained locked on to the approaching party, whose pace had slowed.

“I count only ten,” Patterson said with relief. “Definitely Amelaren, though.”

The other group remained roughly a kilometer away, but their vantage point and the light from the torches gave Shelton a clear view from her position. The attire of these warriors, as well as the physical bulk of the men in the group, were unmistakably characteristic of the enemy.

“Yes,” she agreed. “Two of them appear to be carrying a large trunk. I also see a flag or banner of some kind.”

“Are they trying to draw attention to themselves?” Patterson wondered.

“It could be a trap,” said Baldwin.

“Possibly,” Shelton said. “They are moving too slowly and openly to be an advance party. This

could be an emissary group, but it would be unlike the Amelarens.”

“If that’s the case,” Patterson said, her voice trembling with anger as she gripped the handle of her crossbow, “should we take up sniping positions?”

“No, Sergeant Patterson,” Shelton said sharply. Seeing a chance to address her subordinate personally, she lowered her voice to a whisper. “We will do no such thing. I understand your feelings. You lost a lot at Argiset Highpost. But we will not put ourselves at unnecessary risk, nor will we attack an emissary group unprovoked. Restrain yourself.”

Patterson took a deep breath. “Yes, Captain,” she said begrudgingly.

“Be ready for anything,” Shelton said to the group, reverting to her normal pitch. “Speak up the moment you see anything remotely suspicious.”

“This whole situation is suspicious, Captain,” said Baldwin, stating the obvious. “They do appear to be an emissary force, and if they are, they must be heading for Aldova. Perhaps we should not engage them, and see where they lead us. If they do pose a threat, we have the advantage in numbers and surprise. The safer option would probably be to let Aldova receive them properly.”

From the resulting groans, Shelton recognized the disappointed voice of new soldiers eager for their first battle, and knew they did not appreciate Baldwin’s opinion. By now, she was fairly certain that these Amelarens were not acting in preparation to launch an attack, but she did not agree with his suggestion. At the same time, she was concerned that the more excitable avets would view the sergeant as a coward.

“They don’t seem to be aggressive,” Shelton said. “Unfortunately, we can’t afford to be passive. Until we are certain of their intentions, we’ll keep these brutes as far away from our fortification as we possibly can. If there is a trap, I’d rather find out now.”

Shelton paused to think.

“Sergeant Baldwin, you’ll return to Aldova. Inform Colonel Einhardt of our situation. We’ll most likely need a translator if we’re to have any meaningful conversation anyway. Patterson, you’ll provide backup. Follow slightly behind the rest of the patrol. If the worst outcome occurs, return to Aldova with notice immediately.”

Patterson opened her mouth to protest, but Shelton glared at the sergeant.

“Yes, Captain,” Patterson acknowledged.

“Good.”

Shelton walked over to an avet in the group and took from him an unlit lantern. She pressed the top button and flipped the lantern over to flood the chamber with water. As the solistone inside flickered alight, she gestured down the hill toward the Amelarens.

“Let’s go,” she said, standing up and walking steadily toward the enemy entourage. Her soldiers fell in line behind her.

As the Coranthians drew closer to the enemy, Shelton could see a standard-bearer holding up a white flag, unevenly painted with the Mark of Orlen, a simple design of a crimson downward crescent moon. The deliberately crude smearing gave the unmistakable impression of dripping blood.

Looking at it made Shelton feel uncomfortable. She diverted her attention from the flag to the man who carried it, a burly man with waist-length hair and a long black beard. He wore umber colored armor, representative of his commander, War Chief Izven, and a wooden amulet around his neck that also bore the Mark of Orlen, which signified his rank of elbar, a senior lieutenant to an Amelaren war chief. Several Coranthians relaxed slightly at the sight of one hoisting a flagpole instead of an axe.

The two groups came to a halt with several arms' length between them. The elbar grinned slyly at Shelton, revealing a smile of rotten and decaying teeth. Shelton held back a grimace as she stepped forward and held up her hands.

"You are trespassing on Coranthian territory, Amelaren," she said in the common language of Laestran, mustering her most commanding tone. "State your intentions immediately."

The elbar said something in his native tongue, prompting the two warriors flanking him to laugh boisterously.

"Oh, for Creon's sake," Shelton said impatiently. She turned to face her patrol. "I don't know if we can wait for a translator. Keep a close eye on them. Any sudden movements by the enemy should be dealt with as a threat."

She dropped her hands back to her sides, closer to her sheathed sword. Seeing this, the elbar straightened, and the laughter from the other warriors subsided.

"No, no. We speak Laestran," the elbar said suddenly, surprising Shelton. His accent was thick and voice gravelly, but his words were intelligible. An Amelaren warrior who spoke Laestran was rare, and signified a level of communication suggestive of diplomatic intent. This slightly raised her hopes that the enemy group did not intend to fight.

"Speak, then," she said.

"We have delivery," the elbar said in slow enunciation. He handed off the flagpole to the subordinate on his right, then gestured to the two warriors behind him carrying the large trunk. "For your king."

His grin widened.

"A delivery for our king?" she repeated. "You expect us to let you through with an unknown package? You either must think us mad or stupid, Amelaren."

The elbar raised his eyebrows and paused for several ticks, before laughing and shaking his head.

"No," he said. "No."

The elbar's unhurried demeanor disturbed Shelton.

"It is gift," he said. "From our leader."

"War Chief Izven?" Shelton inquired.

"No," the elbar said. "Not War Chief. Warlord."

Shelton hoped her posture did not betray the shiver that ran down her spine. She waited a few ticks for the elbar to continue, but it was clear he was not going to elaborate further.

"Warlord Orlen?" she said.

"Yes," the elbar said and nodded. "Warlord."

Shelton breathed in deeply. “No matter if it is from the Warlord or a warrior. We will not let you into Coranthian territory, and you certainly will not be making any personal deliveries to our king.”

“Not necessary,” the elbar said. “Not necessary. You take. I see you are captain. You take. That is good.”

He motioned again back at the trunk. One of the Amelarens holding the container caught Shelton’s eye and smiled twistedly at her.

“You take,” the elbar said, “to king.”

“Captain,” a voice behind her protested. Without turning around, Shelton motioned for silence.

“Nothing will reach our king without a thorough inspection, Amelaren,” she said. “If you wish me to deliver your leader’s *gift*, I demand you show me the contents of the trunk.”

The elbar shook his head and chuckled.

“You do not open trunk,” he said.

In response, Shelton placed her hand on the hilt of her blade. Immediately, the rest of the Coranthian patrol followed her lead, ready to draw their own weapons.

The Amelaren quickly lifted his hands in a placating gesture.

“It was suggestion, not threat,” he said, finally sobering. “Nothing dangerous. If you must open before delivery, then your choice.”

He lowered his hands slowly and moved aside. The Amelarens carrying the trunk came forward. They set it on the ground carefully, after which the elbar and the other Amelarens began to back away from the trunk and Shelton’s patrol.

“What is the meaning of this?!” Shelton shouted, stepping forward in turn.

The elbar cocked his head as he continued to withdraw.

“We are done.”

Shelton instinctively started toward the elbar, then froze mid-step. There was no reason to follow them. They were retreating.

Once the Amelarens were sufficiently far away to neutralize the possibility of a sudden advance from the patrol, they extinguished their torches all at once. Shelton heard the elbar’s laugh once more as the enemy force vanished into the blackness of the night.

Shelton stared at the trunk for several reps. Gradually, she became aware that her jaw was throbbing from how tightly her teeth were clenched.

After it became clear that there was no immediate danger of attack, Shelton gave the signal for her patrol to stand down, but appointed two scouts to keep watch slightly ahead. By this time, Sergeant Patterson, who had watched the entire sequence from a distance, had rejoined them.

“What now, Captain?” Patterson asked. “What do you make of this box?”

“I don’t know,” Shelton said. “I’m concerned that there’s nothing in the box at all.”

Patterson frowned in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“I fear they were stalling for time. They were deliberately avoiding giving direct answers to my questions. They spoke and moved slowly. How much time did we waste here? Fifteen reps? Twenty? I

don't like it."

Shelton walked towards the trunk, lit lantern still in hand. Patterson began to follow her, but Shelton stopped the sergeant.

"No, stay back. I'm opening the trunk."

"I'll do it," said Patterson. "Why risk yourself, Captain?"

"I am ordering all of you to stay back," Shelton said to the entire patrol. She stared Patterson down until the latter withdrew obediently.

At last, she turned her full attention to the trunk. The container was plain, standing about half a meter high and almost twice as long. The trunk and its lid were covered in a dark leather, and the only protrusions were a metal clasp for the lid and handlebars on either side to facilitate transport.

She began to smell the pungent chemicals within ten paces. Involuntarily, she wrinkled her nose. She did not feel ill, but was now suspicious that the trunk was rigged with a gas or some sort of explosive. This gave her pause, but a perverse curiosity pushed her closer. As she continued her approach, the scent only grew stronger. It reminded her of salves used in hospitals and clinics.

Hovering over the trunk, she carefully bent down and undid the clasp. As she brought her face near the dark, dirty leather box, she noticed an additional smell, something foul and putrid. Shelton placed her lantern on the ground and slowly raised the lid, taking care not to jostle the container.

She peered inside the trunk. Her face contorted in confusion for a moment. When the realization of its contents came to her, she tried to muffle her gagging. Jerking her head upward, she slammed the lid down and stumbled away.

"Captain?" came Patterson's voice.

"Stay there," Shelton yelled. She bent over, hands resting on her knees. The blood had drained from her face.

Patterson spoke again. "Captain, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I ... I was just taken by surprise," Shelton said, slowly straightening. She coughed forcefully and fought the urge to double over and empty the contents of her stomach onto the ground.

"What—" Patterson started, but then hesitated. "What's in the trunk?"

Shelton took a deep gulp of fresh air.

"We need to get this trunk back to Aldova and to General Mortigan at once," she said. "I want two of you with strong arms and stronger stomachs to haul this thing back."

Holding her breath, Shelton leaned over and quickly locked the trunk clasp in place.

"Patterson, one more thing."

"Yes, Captain?"

"No one is to open this box before we bring it to the general. Absolutely no exceptions. I will take full responsibility. Understood?"

"Understood, Captain."

Arthur Sorel



“This is utterly absurd. I have yet to win a single game this evening!”

In a fit, Arthur Sorel threw his cards down. They landed on the ground, atop a small pile of aetra. He glared at the two female soldiers sitting across from him.

“Perhaps it would be best to stop, Vice Captain,” said one soldier, concern clouding her plain face.

Sorel grunted. “Yes. Between the two of you, I’ve been swindled out of an entire week’s wages. Sergeants, were you not aware that gambling is frowned upon in the military?”

The other soldier began to chuckle.

“But we only played at your insistence,” she goaded playfully.

“Sergeant Monroe, Captain Eldrid will not be hearing a word of this,” he snapped irritably.

“He shan’t,” the still giggling soldier said. “But should you stop now? Just when your luck is bound to change? It would be unfair of me and Sergeant Abberdine to deny you the opportunity to reclaim your aetra.”

Staring into the woman’s playful, vibrant eyes, Sorel was unable to remain angry. Finally, he gave a frustrated groan and ran a hand through his dark, short-cropped hair.

“Fine. I cannot let it end like this.”

“Vice Captain, we ought—” the other soldier began, but Sorel cut her off.

“It’s quite all right, Abberdine,” Sorel said. “Monroe here has a most convincing argument. I have to win at some point.”

Abberdine shook her head reluctantly, and the three resumed their game.

Sorel and his companions sat on the damp grass near the northeastern bridge stretching across the glowing water of Lake Sanmoria, connecting Aldova Fortress to the mainland. The night was quiet aside from the usual sounds of nature and the occasional shout of excitement or dismay over the card game. Other soldiers under Sorel’s command stood nearby. Some scanned the hills to the east or marched along the lake shore. Two of them were assigned to groom Sorel’s horse, hitched to a nearby post. In addition to Sorel’s patrol, there were additional guards from Aldova regularly assigned to keep watch on the bridge.

It had been seven days since the 17th Company began their tour of night patrol duty, delegated to Sorel as a responsibility by his captain. Sorel set about his task begrudgingly, but found less reason to complain after his patrol was relocated from roaming the eastern plains to providing security for the bridge area, close to Aldova. Tonight, his soldiers had done little more than stand around and play cards to their hearts’ content.

Sorel reflected on this as Abberdine dealt the next hand and smiled. Their current station had given him the opportunity to socialize with his subordinates. This brief moment of calm dissipated when

everyone's hands for the round were laid down.

"Unbelievable!" he exclaimed.

Monroe fell into another fit of laughter. Even Abberdine broke out into laughter smile.

"I have to be the unluckiest man in all of Moriana!" Sorel said.

"That's not true, Vice Captain," Abberdine said. "You'll still always be better than Sergeant Essen!"

At the mention of Essen, the cheer quickly faded from Sorel's face. Without saying anything, Sorel drew two cards from the deck and discarded another two from his hand.

"I'm ... I'm sorry, sir," Abberdine stammered.

"It's fine, Sergeant," he said.

"Mary," Monroe said with a frown, "why must you bring up that deserter?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Abberdine repeated anxiously. "I spoke without thinking—"

Sorel forced a smile in her direction. "It's not a problem, Sergeant. We shared some good times with him, yes. But he's no longer a part of our group. I prefer not to dwell on the past."

Before Sorel could say any more, one of the avets on patrol approached them.

"Sir, a five-man contingent is moving toward us, from the east."

The two sergeants scrambled to hide the cards in Monroe's medic bag. Sorel rose to his feet and looked to where the avet was pointing, as the other members of the patrol gathered around him. The approaching group was too far away to be seen with any detail, even in the light provided by the lake solistones.

As the party drew closer at a brisk, even pace, Sorel recognized Coranthian soldiers, but no officers among them. A patrol numbering only five, with no officer present, was an odd sight.

Once they were within earshot, Sorel raised an eyebrow at their worn and scuffed armor. It had been a long time since he'd seen such shabby equipment. Still, the Coranthians had incurred a great number of losses recently. It was reasonable for the army to conserve resources for other things at the moment.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he called out. "Why such haste?"

He stepped directly into the path of the soldiers, who halted immediately. Sorel noticed from their energy and stiff posture that they wanted to move on as soon as possible, but they made no attempt to force their way past him.

None of the soldiers removed a helmet, but Sorel was more concerned that he could not make out their faces clearly. It was also strange that all five happened to be axemen, wearing Coranthian heavy armor. A smaller contingent was more likely to feature at least a scout or medic.

One of the soldiers responded in accented Laestran.

"Vice Captain!" he said, drawing up his hand in a salute. "We were sent by Captain Shelton."

"Oh? What's your name, soldier?" Sorel said.

"Avet Ivan Mandev."

It was a Doromalian name. Sorel did not recognize the strange accent, but the Empire had assimilated many cultures during its conquests. It was quite likely that he would not to recognize the

first Doromalian accent he encountered.

“Where is the rest of Captain Shelton’s patrol?” he asked. “Why are there only five of you?”

“Captain Shelton remains on the eastern plains, sir.” The soldier hesitated, apparently embarrassed. “To be honest, the long nights have taken a toll on us. The captain caught us sleeping and sent us back.”

The man’s tone seemed sincere, but his words rang falsely to Sorel, who knew Shelton not to be the type of captain to do such a thing. In his mind, she was more likely to discipline them on the spot.

“That is quite unbecoming of you!” Sorel said. “And you call yourselves soldiers of Coranthia?”

Mandev did not respond.

“Well,” Sorel continued, “I suppose that’s Shelton’s responsibility. But you did not answer my previous question. Where is her patrol now?”

This time, Mandev answered immediately. “When she sent us back, we were almost directly east from this bridge, on the plains, maybe a kilometer or two to the south. It took us some time to get back. They may be further southeast at this point.”

“Mmm, I see,” Sorel said, nodding. He was making a show of being agreeable, but was beginning to think that his initial suspicions had merit.

“And what did you say your name was again, Avet?”

“Mandev, sir.”

“Mandev,” Sorel repeated. He looked the soldiers up and down. It was plain to him that the longer he kept them, the more agitated they became. They continually shifted their weight and absently adjusted their armor. Sorel stared at Mandev until the latter finally made eye contact.

“Sir, may we return to our bunks?”

Sorel thought he detected annoyance creeping into Mandev’s tone. Then again, he was holding up soldiers who were not under his command and preventing them from returning to their quarters. Still, Sorel could not let them move on.

“Yes, well, actually, I think not.”

“Thank you, si—” Mandev started. His voice dropped off when he realized that Sorel had actually said no.

“What seems to be the problem, sir?”

The vice captain continued to stare at Mandev.

“I think,” Sorel said casually, “that you and your companions will remain with me until your captain returns. Then, we will hear from her together. That is a splendid idea, yes? If what you say is true, she shan’t be much longer. The patrols are scheduled to return within the arc.”

“But, sir!” Mandev said in protest. Behind him, the rest of his cohort visibly stiffened.

“Avet, I may not be your captain, but you should not argue with an officer’s orders.” Sorel offered a smile, but his eyes narrowed.

Mandev gripped the handle of his large two-handed axe.

Sorel watched closely. He could not afford to take his eyes off these men, and hoped that his

subordinates were at the ready behind him.

“Vice Captain, I ...” Mandev began, and then immediately swung his axe.

Sorel jumped to the side as the blade arced through the space where his face had been a tick earlier. He drew his sword.

Behind him, Abberdine and Monroe shouted in unison and rushed forward with their weapons, but the moment Mandev attacked, the remaining four axemen moved to engage the two sergeants and nearby Coranthian soldiers.

“Enemy attack!” someone shouted. A whistle shrilled into the night to signal the main guard station at the base of the fortress.

“Vice Captain!” Monroe shouted urgently.

His immediate reaction was to turn to her voice. Before he could get a good look, he saw Mandev’s axe coming at him from the corner of his eye. Sorel had the advantage of lighter armor and weaponry, and was able to roll away in time and scramble to his feet. Several of the Coranthian soldiers who had been patrolling other points in the area were rushing over to assist with the fighting, but the situation was chaotic. The enemy combatants were greatly outnumbered, but attacked far more fatally. Several bodies of Coranthian soldiers were strewn on the ground. In the mayhem, Sorel could not locate Abberdine or Monroe. He noticed that one of the axemen was occupied with another soldier, leaving his back exposed to the vice captain. Sorel sprang toward the axeman and jammed his sword into the slit between helmet and chest plate. There came a cry of surprise that quickly gave way to a muffled gurgle as the enemy dropped to his knees. The Coranthians who had been fighting him paused in stunned silence.

“What are you waiting for?” Sorel shouted, darting past them. “Engage the remaining enemies!”

Abberdine and two other soldiers had surrounded Mandev, but he was swinging his axe in a wild frenzy, making it difficult for the Coranthians to move in. Abberdine had attempted to aim her crossbow at a weak point in his heavy armor, but there was no chance for an accurate shot with everyone moving around frantically. Sorel and the soldiers following behind him quickly closed the distance. During a pause between Mandev’s swings, Sorel barreled into him. Mandev toppled over to the ground. The other Coranthians immediately descended and dispatched him with a flurry of slashes and stabs. In a fury, one of them drove a blade, with all of his might, completely through the helmet of the already deceased man.

“Thank you, sir,” Abberdine huffed. She was out of breath, but unharmed.

“Where’s Monroe?” Sorel asked, looking around. No enemies remained, but he could not find his other sergeant. He took in the scene and felt lightheaded as he remembered how tranquil it had been just reps earlier.

Abberdine’s face fell anxiously.

“I lost track of her during the fighting.”

“Sergeant Monroe!” Sorel shouted, spinning around in all directions. He called out for her again.

No response. His stomach knotted and he fell silent.

He turned at the sound of shouts from reinforcements rushing down the bridge from Aldova.

“You’re too late,” he said flatly to the approaching soldiers. “Just bring the stretchers.”

Without waiting for a reply, he walked away to recover in solitude.

Over the next arc, medical staff filtered into the area to treat the wounded. Several officers arrived to interview the soldiers who remained in possession of their faculties, attempting to discern what had happened. Many of the remaining newly arrived soldiers were tasked to document the deaths and loaded the corpses onto carts for transport back to the fortress.

The body of Sergeant Francine Monroe lay on a cart in front of Sorel, who stared blankly downward. She had died of blood loss from a severed leg. He was faintly relieved that her face, still unblemished, would be presentable to her family. When he finally regained his presence of mind, he motioned for two soldiers to lift the cart from the ground and transport the body back to Aldova.

“Vice Captain Sorel.”

Two men in officers’ uniforms approached him on horseback. One was a captain, the other a colonel.

“Captain Eldrid. Colonel Einhardt.” Sorel offered a salute that both men returned.

Captain Sigmund Eldrid, Sorel’s superior, had a scarred and sunken face, grimly lit in the solistone light. The newly minted Colonel Einhardt had an imposing physique, but a softer, more empathetic expression.

“What a mess,” Einhardt said, rubbing at his bald head with frustration. “We removed the armor from the assailants,” said Captain Eldrid.

“Did you discover anything, sir?” Sorel asked.

“No,” said the colonel, dismounting from his horse. “No markings, no personal effects, no additional weapons. Based on our examination, we cannot even confirm they were Amelarens.”

“They were,” Sorel stated firmly.

“So you said when we first arrived, Vice Captain, but there is no proof. We must consider the possibility that these were our own. I have conversed with our medical staff at great length, and I gather these last few cycles have been especially trying. I do not wish to believe it could be the case, but it would not be impossible if our own men experienced a mental breakdown.”

“Colonel, I trust in my vice captain’s judgment,” Eldrid said. “Arthur, you mentioned earlier that one spoke with an accent, correct?”

Sorel nodded. “Yes, the Laestran was perfectly understandable, but most certainly accented. I had believed it to be a Doromalian accent unfamiliar to me.”

“I find it highly unlikely that five axemen in the Coranthian army would lose their wits all at once,” Eldrid said, glancing at his superior.

“Indeed,” Colonel Einhardt said, stroking his wispy black mustache. “Still, we must consider all possibilities. Frankly, I’m not sure what outcome I’d find more troubling. Our own men attacking us, or the enemy employing such deceitful tactics? They’ve relied on their brute strength up in the past. I am glad that you intercepted them, Vice Captain. I am not sure the regular night guard would have

prevented them from marching right into Aldova. We were fortunate tonight, gentlemen. This could have devolved into a far worse situation.”

They fell silent for several ticks. Nobody had a suitable response, because they all knew what Einhardt said was true. They would not win this war if they relied on chance, and so far, it seemed chance was the only thing that had been helping them escape absolute annihilation in the last few battles.

“Hopefully, when Captain Shelton returns from her patrol, she can shed some more light on all this,” Einhardt finally said. “Depending on what she says, we may have to meet with General Mortigan and Colonel Lariban. But I do not wish to provide them with an incomplete picture.”

“I am concerned, sir,” Sorel said. “None of our other patrols have returned. They were expected around half an arc ago. Should we send out a search party?”

As he spoke, he noticed movement in his periphery. A young man with blond hair in sergeant’s uniform was walking slowly toward the three of them, taking in the sight of soldiers and medical staff still in the area. Sorel’s superiors did not appear to notice him right away; the soldier did not interrupt as Einhardt and Eldrid continued to debate a search for the missing patrols. Finally, Sorel cleared his throat and nodded in the direction of the sergeant to draw their attention to the young subordinate, who saluted them.

“Oh, you’re with Captain Shelton’s company, yes?” Einhardt said. “Sergeant Beldin, I believe?”

“Baldwin, sir, and yes, I’m with Captain Shelton’s company.”

“And where is Captain Shelton?” Einhardt inquired.

“Still out east, sir,” Baldwin said. “I’m to request reinforcements, but ... what happened here, sir?”

“What?” said Eldrid. “Never mind that, Sergeant. What is this about reinforcements?”

Baldwin recounted the events leading up to Shelton’s dispatch for him to return for reinforcements, after her patrol had encountered a seemingly non-hostile but advancing group of Amelarens transporting unidentifiable cargo. While Eldrid demanded descriptions of the Amelarens themselves, Colonel Einhardt appeared more interested at the mention of the trunk and pressed for more information to that end. Unfortunately, the overwhelmed Baldwin had no additional details, having departed for Aldova before learning anything more.

“How far out were you?” Einhardt said.

Baldwin stared thoughtfully at the ground for several ticks.

“To be honest,” he said. “I’m not certain, sir. I was in a hurry to return, and did not remember to bring a lantern with me, and ... Well, I got lost. It took me some time to get back here. Maybe an arc?”

“You got lost?!” Einhardt repeated incredulously. “For Rhynon’s sake! How did you get to be sergeant? Are we that desperate?”

Guilty and embarrassed, Baldwin looked away.

“Sir,” Eldrid said. “If what Sergeant Baldwin says is true, it may be prudent simply to wait for Shelton’s patrol to return, or send a small scouting party at the most. If something did happen, a full reinforcement troop may arrive too late to be of any meaningful assistance.”

“I do not believe further contemplation will be necessary, Captain,” Einhardt said, pointing to the east. “I’d wager that’s one of our patrols over there now.”

The other three men turned to see a rapidly approaching series of lantern lights in the distance. Einhardt untied his horse from a nearby tree and mounted heavily.

“Come,” Einhardt said. “We shall meet them.”

Eldrid and Sorel followed Einhardt’s example and swiftly mounted their horses. Captain Eldrid motioned to Sergeant Baldwin, who stared at the officers without making any attempt to follow.

“You too, Sergeant. Climb on. You may ride with me.”

Visibly embarrassed and unnerved by having been rebuked by a colonel in front of two other superior officers, Baldwin hesitated before hopping onto the back of Eldrid’s horse.

The four of them rode across the grassy plains towards the eastern hills. As they closed in on the patrol, they recognized Shelton, and saw that two of her soldiers were hauling what appeared to be a large, canvased trunk. Shelton halted her patrol and waved down the incoming riders.

At the sight of the trunk, a chill ran down Sorel’s spine. He did his best to stave off his unease.

“Glad to see you, Captain,” Einhardt said as he dismounted his horse.

Shelton saluted the colonel and motioned to the trunk behind her, which her soldiers had set down heavily.

“We have much to discuss, Colonel.”

“That we do, Captain,” Einhardt said, staring at the trunk. “A word with you and the other officers in private, if you please.”

He waited as Shelton gave her orders to the patrol and greeted Baldwin, who rested at a nearby grove. When the young sergeant was well out of earshot, Shelton wearily summarized her encounter with the Amelarens. When she described what lay inside the trunk, her voice faltered.

“I wish it were merely a cruel and tasteless joke.”

Einhardt hung open his mouth incredulously.

“Captain, are you absolutely certain of what you saw?” he asked. “I find this most difficult to believe.”

“I am entirely certain, sir.”

Despite her words, Shelton realized that none of the three men seemed especially convinced. In lieu of an explanation, she simply motioned toward the trunk.

“If you wish to see for yourself, sir ...” she offered.

Einhardt thought for a moment, then strode over to the container. He stalled for a rep, walking around the large, canvased container. He inspected it from every angle and tilted the trunk slightly to judge its weight, before finally bending over to undo the clasp. Slowly, he lifted the lid, then stared blankly at its contents for a moment. As it had with Shelton, the realization came all at once.

“For Rhynon’s—”

Einhardt quickly stifled his voice and slammed the trunk shut, drawing curious and anxious glances from the nearby soldiers, who were still unaware of what they had brought back. Doing his best to

maintain a neutral expression, he headed back toward where the officers stood.

Meanwhile, Sorel had been telling the two captains of the encounter at the bridge, struggling to retain his composure as he remembered Monroe. When they saw the colonel return, Sorel and Eldrid were surprised that the normally unflappable Einhardt was breathing heavily and seemed visibly ill. Shelton sighed knowingly.

“This is a nightmare,” said Einhardt. “An absolute nightmare.”

“Yes, sir,” Shelton agreed.

Still lost in his thoughts, Sorel offered little reaction. Meanwhile, Einhardt merely looked dumbfounded.

It was left to Captain Eldrid, who had listened carefully to the testimonies of both Sorel and Shelton, to try to put the pieces together. He turned to the latter, who seemed the most clearly focused at the moment.

“Captain Shelton, are you absolutely certain that the men who attacked Vice Captain Sorel are unknown to you?”

“Undoubtedly,” Shelton replied. “They must have been enemy combatants. I do not think that these two events were coincidental.”

“I agree. They are linked in some way, but the connection is unclear.” Eldrid frowned contemplatively. “What is your opinion of this? You mentioned that the emissaries, if we could so generously refer to them as such, seemed to be stalling for time. Why do you think that is the case?”

“I don’t know,” said Shelton. “They were moving steadily before we confronted them, but then they seemed to delay handing over the trunk for as long as possible. Perhaps they just wanted to show that they had no intention to attack us.”

“Wouldn’t they try to disengage as soon as possible, then?” Eldrid wondered.

Sorel was only vaguely following the conversation, and stared blankly at Shelton for some time. He was not particularly close to her, but found her character generally agreeable. While some soldiers found it difficult to communicate with her, particularly given her coarse appearance, her scarred cleft lip and strong build did not particularly bother Sorel. Instead, he disapproved of her aloofness and stubborn adherence to protocol. While he sympathized with her likely desire to be respected, as an un stated female officer, he thought her demeanor to be a weakness on the battlefield, potentially demoralizing for those under command. But now he could sense that she had reached a breaking point, and was struggling to maintain her façade of detachment. And as his thoughts persisted, he experienced a flash of insight.

“The attackers on the bridge mentioned you by name, Captain Shelton,” said Sorel. “That must be the connection. They specifically said that you were their commanding officer, because they thought that there was no way you would be present to dispute the claim.”

Einhardt, who had gradually recovered his wits, overheard this and achieved a breakthrough of his own.

“Yes, that’s it,” he said. “That’s what was bothering me about the trunk. The weight. It is extremely

heavy, unnecessarily so, given what's ... inside. It was designed to slow you down, Shelton. So that you would not return to Aldova in time."

Shelton's eyes widened.

"Of course," she said. "I should have realized it as soon as you told me about the bridge, Vice Captain. I knew what they were doing, but I couldn't figure out why."

"No need to be so hard on yourself," Sorel said. "You handled the situation properly."

"It is imperative we take this to General Mortigan immediately," said Einhardt. "We will further increase bridge security."

"I do wonder," Sorel said. "What was their plan? It was rather ill-conceived. What if, upon her return, any of the guards asked the captain about the soldiers she supposedly sent back early? Our assailants would have been caught shortly after infiltrating Aldova."

"With all five of them dead, we are left with little more than conjecture," Einhardt said. "We must return to the general and debrief him. I shall send out parties to search for the remaining two patrols."

"I still don't understand what the Amelarens hoped to achieve," Shelton said. "Did they not expect to find you at the bridge, Vice Captain Sorel? And why did they only choose to delay me?"

"Perhaps you were not the only one to be accosted in this manner," Eldrid suggested.

"And why do you suppose that, Captain?" Einhardt asked, stroking his mustache.

Captain Eldrid pointed beyond where the bridge met the lake shore. "It would appear that Captain Schaeffer's patrol also comes bearing gifts."

The officers turned to see members of the 27th Company carrying lanterns and what appeared to be another large, unwieldy trunk.

• • •

An arc later, Sorel found himself standing in the office of General Leopold San Mortigan along with Colonel Radley Lariban, as well as all the officers involved in the night's affairs. Lariban remained at Mortigan's side as all other officers stood at attention across from the general's desk, anxiously awaiting his words.

Having been recently roused from his sleep, Mortigan stifled a yawn. He leaned forward in his high-backed leather chair and propped his elbows on the refined cherry wood desk in front of him, clasping his hands together. He stared in silence at the trunks laid before him. There were now three in total; the last had only just been delivered by a second patrol for the 27th Company, led by Vice Captain Gaston.

Mortigan slowly raised his eyes to meet the gaze of his officers.

"Einhardt," Mortigan said in a deep, calm voice, his face expressionless.

The colonel stepped forward.

"Sir."

"You shall depart Aldova immediately. Take these trunks with you. Commandeer whatever men, supplies, and vehicles you deem necessary. You are to ride straight to the capital and deliver these to

the king and Cabinet. You must make haste and arrive as soon as possible.”

“Sir,” Einhardt confirmed. “I must inquire. With Colonel Osterfeld currently away, perhaps someone else may prove a better fit for the task at hand?”

Mortigan ran a hand through his graying beard.

“No, Colonel, I think not,” Lariban said, his steely eyes locking with Einhardt’s. “Someone of your rank should perform the delivery. This is a most sensitive matter. You will return as soon as you are able, but your priority is to meet with His Majesty.”

“Yes, sir.”

Lariban addressed the others in the same icy tone.

“As for the rest of you, you are to hold in confidence what transpired tonight. This seems to have been a coordinated operation by the enemy forces, but the official story will be disseminated to the army as a failed raid. Given our recent losses, we must maintain morale and curtail the possibility of paranoia and rampant speculation among our troops.”

The officers chorused their acknowledgment. Sorel frowned and felt a pang of doubt. He wondered if it would have been better to make the incident known, and prepare the army against similar attempts in the future. He understood Colonel Lariban’s reasoning, but did not entirely agree with it.

Mortigan noticed Sorel’s hesitant expression.

“Some of you may not see the need for silence, but I will brook no discussion on this matter,” he said. “It is of the utmost important that the events of this night travel no farther than this room. You will be held personally responsible should word spread among your patrol. Is that understood?”

Sternly, the general scanned the face of each captain or vice captain in turn. Without hesitation, all the officers saluted in acknowledgment.

“Good. Dismissed. Remove these trunks from my office.” Mortigan paused, then looked directly at Einhardt. “Colonel, good luck and may Rhynon watch over your ride.”

“Thank you, sir,” Einhardt said.

Sorel and the other officers hoisted the trunks out of the general’s office and into Hall of Champions. Though it was late, lighting was still ample within the walls of Aldova. Lining the corridor walls, in this and every other main passage throughout the fortress, were large, water-filled half-pipes endlessly streaming with solistones.

“You may set the trunks down here,” Einhardt said when they had reached his office, several rooms down from Mortigan’s. “I will summon my men to come take them away. For extra security, one of you should stay guard until I return.”

Sorel spoke up. “I will—”

“Sir, Vice Captain Gaston and I will keep watch,” Captain Schaeffer interrupted.

Sorel grimaced. He had always thought of Schaeffer as little more than an ingratiating, pompous ass who constantly overcompensated for his want of skills.

“Very well,” Einhardt said. “Thank you, Captain Schaeffer. I shall return within ten reps.”

After the colonel was gone, Captain Eldrid turned to the other officers.

“Thank you all for handling tonight’s unfortunate affairs so capably. If there is nothing further, Vice Captain Sorel and I will take our leave. Schaeffer, thank you for assuming this duty so promptly.”

Casually, Schaeffer waved off Eldrid. “This is a simple matter. Gaston and I are quite capable of tending to these. You need not linger.”

There was a knowing edge to Schaeffer’s words. Sorel clenched his jaw, but Eldrid’s knowing gaze kept him in check. They saluted the other officers and exited Einhardt’s office. The two of them walked down the hall in silence for half a rep before Sorel spoke.

“That pinhead Schaeffer doesn’t deserve to be trusted with such an important task. I should have drowned him out and insisted to the colonel.”

“Let it go, Arthur,” Eldrid said.

“The man is too inept to find his own ass with two hands and a solistone.”

Eldrid sighed. “Why do you hate the man so?”

“Hatred may be too strong a feeling, Sigmund. Annoyance is far more appropriate. Though I must confess, I cannot stand being in the man’s presence for an extended period. Even when his mouth is shut, I find him rather insufferable.”

The captain studied his subordinate closely.

“Arthur ... The loss of Sergeant Monroe must be difficult for you.”

Sorel winced.

“We lost soldiers tonight,” he said. “I lost them on my watch.”

“You may have saved many more lives tonight. You do realize that, don’t you? It would not surprise me if this earned you a promotion. You’d certainly have my recommendation.”

Sorel’s expression hardened.

“I still failed my comrades tonight. I appreciate the kind words, Sigmund, but I did nothing praiseworthy.”

Eldrid exhaled.

“Arthur, you really ought to—”

“Excuse me, Captain, Vice Captain.”

Both men turned to see Captain Shelton behind them. Sorel wondered how much she had overheard.

“I apologize for interrupting,” she said. “May I have a word with Vice Captain Sorel?”

Eldrid glanced at Sorel, who waved him onward with a nod.

“Another time then, Arthur,” Eldrid said, then bowed to Shelton. “Captain, good night to you.”

“How may I be of assistance, Captain?” Sorel asked, after Eldrid had gone. Shelton seemed uneasy. Her face was difficult to read in the ethereal glow of the solistones lighting the hallway.

“I wanted to apologize again, Vice Captain,” she said.

“Arthur, please. Why apologize, Captain?”

“Jane,” she returned.

“Very well, Jane.”

She took a deep breath. "I apologize, Arthur, for not acting differently and reaching Aldova on schedule. Had my patrol returned in time..."

"No apology necessary," Sorel said, stumbling over the words. These words made him feel awkward. Not only was she his superior in rank; he was hardly prepared for such a display of emotion from her. "You performed admirably and appropriately."

There was a long pause before she spoke again.

"Maybe so, but it's difficult to accept that there was nothing I could have done to prevent what happened ..."

Sorel came to an abrupt stop. Shelton turned to look at him. They stared at each other uncomfortably. He could see her face clearly now, and could not help but notice Shelton's haggard exhaustion. Perhaps he had been overly harsh in judging her. He knew of the losses she had suffered at Tull Rock the previous cycle, losses far beyond anything he had ever experienced, and that she held herself responsible for them. He thought of how the deaths resulting from this latest skirmish would be added to the heavy toll she carried with her always, and no one would be able to convince her that they did not belong squarely on her shoulders.

"Jane," Sorel said. "Would you like to have a drink with me?"

A look of surprise flickered across Shelton's normally guarded face before her expression became blank once more, but Sorel saw it. Saying nothing, she nodded in agreement, and they continued to walk side by side down the hall.

Adrian Coranthis



Prince Adrian Lanford Coranthis stood beside his father's throne in contemplative silence.

In the thirty-three days since Adrian had returned to the castle from his station at Argiset Highpost, his father, King Samsen Caden Coranthis, had made a concerted effort to involve Adrian in the day-to-day business of leading the country. Initially, Adrian resisted his confinement to the castle, and he disliked the seemingly endless series of meetings he was forced to attend. While it preoccupied him and stayed his thoughts from lingering upon the terrible events of the Highpost, he became increasingly agitated as the dull days wore on. His patience for complaints about harvests, bandits, civil disputes, and the self-serving requests of Coranthisian nobility wore thin. There was a war going on, and he did not see a point in listening to such prattle, all the while knowing that soldiers were at the front dying for their country. The battle at the Highpost, while traumatic beyond anything the prince had ever experienced, only made him more determined to fight.

In a moment of anger, he had openly accused his father of coddling him and demanded to be, at the least, allowed off the castle grounds. Instead of attempting to alleviate his son's restlessness, Samsen insisted that as a prince and a future king, Adrian had a responsibility to his country that superseded the nursing of his own wounded ego. Despite Samsen's harsh words, Adrian wondered if his father's decision was simply driven by the desire to keep him out of harm's way. Ultimately, the prince had swallowed his pride and acquiesced to Samsen's will.

As was routine for the first three of ten days in every calendar turn, the royalty received various requests and grievances of their subjects by way of personal audience. Adrian and his father presided from the upper level of the dais in the castle's audience chamber, the King's Hall, while the four ministers of the Royal Cabinet sat in their chairs on the lower level. They were currently addressing a report from Asuna Lierra, the secretary of Calena's Magistrate.

"I do comprehend the gravity of the situation, Miss Lierra," Minister of Defense Ferdin Velmann said flatly as he examined his nails, "but the fact remains: we can ill afford to divert any of our soldiers from the front to assist in the Outlands. As things currently stand, we must focus our efforts on restoring the ranks on the front."

Adrian vaguely remembered the sandy haired, spectacled woman as the former secretary for the Ministry of the Interior. Although he had paid attention only intermittently to the day's proceedings to this point, he was curious to hear what she had to say. She made no previous impression on him as a silent assistant within the ministry, but now, the sight of her speaking openly to royalty recaptured his flagging interest.

"There's the matter of the late payments on defense taxes as well," Lierra said doggedly. Seated atop his throne, Samsen spoke.

“Miss Lierra, while I am sympathetic to the magistrate’s situation, it is ultimately his responsibility to collect the taxes. These are the duties of his position. As was just stated, we are aware of the growing problem in the Outlands, and we will address it to the extent that our resources will allow. But we are at war, and this makes it all the more crucial that taxes are properly collected. You may inform the magistrate that we are unable to currently send assistance, and that I am most confident in his ability to do his job. That is why he was granted his position.”

What drivel, Adrian thought. He should have known that the topic of conversation would devolve into discussing such trifling matters. People from the Outlands seemed to care only about their own narrow experiences, and were apparently unaware that the country was currently facing a much greater threat. The problems of the Outlands could be dealt with properly after they addressed the barbarian menace. If Coranthia were to be overrun with Amelarens, what would the state of the Outlands matter to anyone?

He was so lost in his head that he had not noticed the messenger enter the room until the man was already beside Samsen’s throne and whispering into the king’s ear.

“My apologies, Miss Lierra,” Samsen said, returning his attention to the patiently waiting secretary. “This topic certainly warrants some additional discussion before you return to Calena, but I ask that you might return another day. An important matter has arisen that I must see to immediately, and this conversation has already extended well past our originally scheduled time.”

Adrian’s eyes lit up and his pulse quickened. Finally, maybe something interesting would happen.

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Lierra said with a polite bow. “I shall take it upon myself to schedule another meeting with you and the Cabinet. Your gracious attention to this matter is greatly appreciated.”

Samsen smiled and nodded.

“I would not have you nor the magistrate think me indifferent to your concerns, but we shall continue this at a later time. You may leave now.”

With another courteous bow, Secretary Asuna Lierra took her leave through the large double doors at the far end of the King’s Hall.

“What’s this about, Your Majesty?” Minister Velmann said with concern. He struggled to shift his bulk enough in the chair so that he could face Samsen.

“Colonel Einhardt brings urgent news from Aldova,” Samsen said.

The prince tensed and gripped his chair with anticipation as the double doors at the far end of the room slowly groaned open, admitting Colonel Einhardt and half a dozen soldiers dragging three large trunks. Adrian rose to his feet and stared in silent curiosity as the men hauled the trunks before the king and arranged them in front of the dais. He felt the blood rushing to his fingertips.

As each trunk was carefully set on the white tiled floor, a putrid whiff filled Adrian’s nostrils, and he wrinkled his nose in disgust. Samsen twisted his face into a similar expression, indicating that he had caught the odor as well.

Einhardt and his patrol bowed deeply to king, prince, and Cabinet.

“Your Majesty, please forgive me for the interruption.”

“Give us your news, Colonel,” said Samsen.

Einhardt, tired and perspiring heavily, managed to deliver a concise report of the Aldova patrols’ encounters with the Amelaren emissaries, the “gifts,” and the enemy infiltration attempt via Aldova’s eastern bridge. He did not mention the contents of the trunks.

Adrian spied on his father’s impassive expression as Einhardt spoke. The prince continually found himself holding in his breath to avoid inhaling the overwhelming odors wafting from the trunks. It was an acerbic combination of something heady and spoiled which made his eyes water.

After Einhardt finished, a silence fell over the chamber.

“Colonel,” Samsen began, his voice controlled and level. “This is indeed alarming. However, your swift arrival and thorough report are greatly appreciated. We will process this as promptly as possible. You shall remain in Corande this evening while I discuss this situation with Minister Velmann.”

At the mention of his name, Minister of Defense Velmann again shifted uncomfortably in his seat, but nodded in consent.

“Your arrival is rather timely, Colonel. It was my intention to send a missive to General Mortigan today, so we shall draft additional instructions, which I will leave it in your capable hands.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Will that be all?” Einhardt said, sounding almost relieved.

“No, Colonel,” Samsen said with annoyance. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

The king raised an eyebrow and leaned forward.

“Would you be so kind as to elaborate on the contents of these? They seem particularly ... pungent, and you happened to conveniently leave out that little detail.”

Adrian noticed trails of glistening sweat on Einhardt’s temples.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Einhardt cleared his throat. “We added perfume en route to mask the smell became problematic.” He paused. “I believe Your Majesty may wish to investigate them in private.”

Samsen furrowed his brow.

“Come, Colonel. We have little time to waste. Report on the contents, open them now, or remove them from my presence.”

“Your Majesty, I most respectfully request—”

“I will open them,” Adrian announced, feeling compelled to unveil the source of Einhardt’s growing discomfort. “Father, we can see for ourselves. You are dismissed, Colonel.”

He glanced at his father for approval. The king rubbed a forefinger and thumb to his forehead as he nodded wordlessly and waved the colonel away.

Einhardt took a cloth from inside his officer’s coat and dabbed at his sweaty face. “Apologies, Your Majesty.”

As Einhardt made his hasty exit from the room, the double doors closing behind him, Adrian stepped down from the dais and approached the containers. He held his breath once again as he knelt and unlatched the closest trunk. As he raised the lid, he allowed himself to exhale at the sight of its

contents. A sword.

Gingerly, he lifted the fragments of an ornate sword from their cloth bedding to show his father. The beautifully detailed hilt remained mostly intact, but the blade was broken into four large shards.

“That hilt ...” Velmann said, leaning forward. “General Leynitz’s sword ...”

Adrian looked to his father but could read nothing in the king’s eyes. After a moment, Samsen motioned for his son to continue.

The second trunk held a battered, stained set of armor. Adrian carefully lifted the breastplate out of the box so all on the dais could see. The elaborate etchings and designs were marred by dents and slashes, and across the front, painted in what Adrian could only assume was blood, was the familiarly crude insignia of a crescent moon. The Mark of Orlen.

Adrian carefully returned the breastplate to the trunk and closed the lid. As he slowly turned to the third unopened box, his heart thudded and he swallowed painfully. The sight of those familiar armaments, damaged beyond repair, brought tears to his eyes.

His trembling fingers reached for the third latch.

“Adrian.”

His father called out to him, but the voice sounded muffled to him, as if far off in the distance.

“Don’t—”

The prince undid the clasp and lifted the lid. Bile rose, sharp and stinging, to the back of his throat, but he would not let himself look away. The cloth cushion beneath the severed head of General Marsell Leynitz was stained with putrid liquid. Adrian sank to the floor, granting a clear view to those on the dais. He could hear the ministers muttering and gasping behind him. The eye sockets were empty and puckered, the skin dyed bluish-green from the acrid embalming fluid that caused Adrian to gag involuntarily.

The muttering soon gave way to shouts and yelling behind him, but still he would not look away. Blood pounded in his head. Each breath he drew in seemed an eternity.

When he finally turned to glance back at his father, he saw the throne was empty. He felt a squeeze of pressure of his shoulder and looked up to see the king standing over him, gripping onto his son tightly. Samsen’s face was darkened and stony, his eyes fixed on the defiled remains.

“Leave,” the king commanded, releasing his son’s shoulder. Adrian wiped his face on a sleeve and shook his head, his throat too closed for words. The king reached down and slammed the trunk shut. He stood stiffly, not looking at his son.

“Leave, Adrian. Now.”

Adrian shook his head again.

“Leave now or I swear to Creon I will have you dragged out of here.”

His father’s venomous hiss rang in his ears. Adrian blotted his eyes and made his way to the back of the room. By the doorway he leaned himself against a massive column, propping his arms against his knees, taking in gulps of sharp air.

“Your Majesty ... that was ... unnecessary,” said Velmann, rising from his seat on the dais.

“What was unnecessary was this nauseating display,” Samsen said, breathing heavily. “Clearly victory alone is not enough to satisfy that man. He must also subject us to this hideous farce.”

Adrian found the strength to detach himself from the pillar. He walked slowly to near where his father stood. After he cleared the lump from his throat, he spoke in an unsteady, uncertain voice.

“Father—” he began, but instead of turning to him, the king continued to address Minister Velmann.

“So, does the Warlord expect to lay such an egregious insult with no repercussions?”

“Your Majesty,” Velmann said cautiously. “The meeting with the Empire is merely a cycle away. Once we have acquired the weapons—”

“I am no fool, Ferdin,” Samsen cut in. “But if he thinks to deter us, to break our will to fight, then he will be sorely disappointed.”

He paused in thought, his face hardening further with the passing of each tick.

“Perhaps I should attend the meeting after all,” he said.

“No, I don’t think that’s wise, Your Majesty,” Velmann said. “Both you and the Emperor have already announced your intents to abstain from the negotiations. Your original intent should be preserved. We must present ourselves as equals.”

“Father,” Adrian said. “I am just as appalled by this—”

“Not now,” Samsen said, raising his voice. “I believe I ordered you to leave.”

Adrian had merely wished to bolster his father’s confidence, but it was clear that Samsen required nothing of him at the moment. As Adrian lingered without eliciting any further reprimand, the king no longer seemed to acknowledge his presence at all.

“So, what now?” Samsen asked.

“Your Majesty, perhaps we ought to meet this evening to discuss this further,” Velmann said, eyeing Adrian apprehensively.

Samsen breathed deeply, his entire body shaking. “Very well. I concur.”

He turned to address the other ministers.

“I want all of you to consider what more can be done to skew the approaching negotiations with the Empire in our favor. Nothing should be left to chance. Now more than ever, we will need the power to completely and utterly destroy our enemy.”

With that, the king hastily departed the chambers through one of the rear exits near the dais, leaving Adrian and the four ministers in solemn silence.

Beams of sunlight filtered in through the windows spanning the western wall. Adrian stared numbly at the patterns of light and shadow cast over the trunk. Ignoring the rancid smell that was still causing his stomach to convulse, he sank to his knees before the trunk, heedless of the ministers who were quietly filtering out of the room. He gingerly laid a hand on the lid of the trunk. His eyes were heavy with tears as he squeezed his eyelids shut, plunging into his memories of that night at the Highpost.

They consisted mostly of sounds: the ceaseless clash of steel, the rending of flesh and bone, the desperate cries and agonized screams. But the one that haunted him most was the steady, firm voice that rang out in the darkness—that of General Leynitz, yelling the order for Adrian to flee. The

highest priority, the only priority, had been to protect him.

How many lives had been sacrificed for the sake of his own?

Opening his eyes, Adrian forced himself to raise the lid and contemplate the contents of the trunk once more. His lips moved wordlessly as he whispered the name of his deceased friend and mentor. After a rep, he closed the lid and hooked its clasp. Shakily, he rose to his feet. His head down, he trudged slowly to the fore of the room and slipped through the double doors. Then in the grand chamber there were only the final vestiges of a Coranthian soldier, lingering in front of the empty throne.