

CHAPTER TWO

Vance Marhoust pulled off his right gauntlet and tightened the strap on his shield. His fingers were already numb to the cold wind whipping across the plain. Beneath him Broadback stamped and snorted in excitement. The powerful white stallion, like the knight riding him, was layered with sheets of protective armor, the cold grey steel glistening with droplets of swirling snow. The single black star-shaped mark on Broadback's nose identified him as one of Biel's best stock, bred for battle. He could sense the difference between the practice horns and a summons to true combat. Marhoust let the horse dance in a circle, impatient for the bloodshed to begin.

Marhoust tucked his helmet under his muscled arm and studied the battlefield. A barren plain stretched several leagues to the wooded foothills of the Sauris Mountains. The night before storm clouds had escaped the grasp of the mountains and dusted the fields with light, drifting snow. Flocks of black crows picked away at tufts of corn jutting up from the drifts in the fallow fields. Cut from vast forests generations ago, the smallfolk of Castle Travis had abandoned these fields when the Thrall had captured Pinixer Castle and constructed a lower camp only a few leagues away.

The blowing white haze obscured the lower Thrall camp and Pinixer Pass, but on a clearer day one could see the highest tower of that conquered keep jutting up between two rounded hills in the mountains. The audacity of establishing a camp within sight of Castle Travis impressed even Marhoust, but since Pinixer had fallen the Griffin Confederation had given Thrall little to fear. Outside of the elite knights of the Golden Tide, there had been no Confederation army in place when the Thrall so quickly and unexpectedly attacked Pinixer. Marhoust glanced to the ragged tent camp behind Travis, where the levies of untrained and untried troops from the Confederation lords had made camp. Most likely only the threat of the Tide had kept the Thrall from advancing further into the Confederation. All summer he and his fellow knights had chafed under the restrictive orders, which limited them to patrols and inconclusive skirmishes with small units of Thrall at the edge of the pass while they awaited an army of sufficient numbers to move against the enemy. Just as their army had approached readiness, High Lord Hinrik had been assassinated and Lord Commander Aidan had departed to assume the throne.

Marhoust replaced the helmet on his freshly shaved head, adjusted the strap under his jutting chin and locked the visor open. Other knights of the Golden Tide continued to stream out of

Castle Travis and take their places in the formation. The armored stallion of Gabrel Ophas cantered toward him. Ophas was Third on the List and the senior knight from the contingent of Lord Dorsy, the second most-powerful lord in the Confederation behind the High Lord in Biel. Marhoust envied Ophas' extravagant armor, tinged orange with gold-leaf designs of griffins engraved on the breastplate and shield. A knight's armor was a statement of his lord's wealth. Marhoust's own plain mail was dented, mended many times, and lacked engraving. "Marhoust," Ophas called out in a deep, gravelly voice. "Lord Commander Connall asked for you to join us in the command circle."

Marhoust's heart leapt. He was finally to be given his duel!

"With your victory over Knight Woral yesterday you rose to Sixth on the List," Ophas said. "You will command the lancers on one flank." He pulled his horse to a halt next to Marhoust and studied the younger knight with a long, appraising glance. "I hear Woral almost unhorsed you?"

"The victory was nearly his," Marhoust admitted. "My lance splintered on the first pass. That had me seeing stars, but on the next pass I caught his lance in my flail and pulled him off his horse. I barely stayed on myself."

"No doubt he saw the same stars as you," Ophas chuckled. "With this unexpected call to battle, you have earned what would have been his command assignment. He is not pleased."

"He was at least the best challenge yet," Marhoust said.

The two knights glanced across the plain, but as of yet could not see enemy troops making their way through the wafting snow. Ophas said, "Surprising that the Thrall would assemble in this weather after hiding behind their walls all this time."

"Let them come," Marhoust declared. "I'm just pleased that they are fool enough to give us a fight. Better here than up that cursed pass where their archers can hide amongst the boulders. I had feared that we wouldn't get a chance at them until the spring."

"I shared that fear. It's been so damned hard sitting down here chewing on the bone while those bastards hold Pinixer." He was silent for several moments. "Woral was your twentieth straight challenge and victory. An impressive streak, although the wisdom of pursuing challenges so impatiently could be questioned."

"I am seldom accused of wisdom," Marhoust grinned, white teeth flashing. "But I am well acquainted with impatience. I aim to become First on the List, and eventually Lord Commander. If Tide laws allowed me to make another challenge sooner than the next turn of the moon I would do so."

"Becoming First on the List does not automatically lead to the Lord Commander's post. If it did, Mor Dragis would have been chosen when Aidan left to take the High Lord's seat," Ophas pointed out. He scratched at a jagged scar that ran along his stubbly chin. The old wound marred an otherwise handsome face, with intelligent brown eyes well-balanced over a square jaw. "Marhoust, the High Lord can choose the Lord Commander from any of the top knights of the Tide. There are many considerations for such a high post. The loyalties of the Tide not least among them, and some among the Tide begrudge your sprint up the List."

"I care not that they begrudge being bested."

"You must also consider your family."

Marhoust's face reddened. "What has my family to do with it?"

Ophas smiled, his dark eyes sharp and knowing. "You hail from Lord Bates' lands. Bates has the smallest number of smallfolk among all the lords. Dragis served under Lord Pinixer. With Pinixer fallen, how many more trained men could have been pledged had Dragis been elevated to Lord Commander?"

"None! But Dragis still should have received the honor. He has been First on the List for two years."

"True, but Connall was a fierce knight in his day. And have you not heard of the messages

from Lord Barnett pledging more men now that Connall has been chosen as Lord Commander?" Ophas glanced around. The other horsed warriors crowded together in small knots, talking and joking amongst themselves, their breath puffing out in misty clouds. Ranks of spearmen and archers came trudging out of the castle, weapons balanced on their shoulders as they hurried to take their places.

"I fear Connall's age shows now," Marhoust said. "Will he lead our charge as Aidan or Dragis would? The Thrall must pay. Stealing Pinixer in the dead of night. Assassinating our High Lord. They have chosen to fight today, but it should have been us pressing them. Aidan had to wait while the army formed, but we were nearly ready when he was called back to Biel. What is Connall's excuse for waiting this past month?"

Ophas shifted about in his saddle, obviously uncomfortable with Marhoust's blunt appraisal of their commander. "The Lord Commander will bait the Thrall," he said. "Lull them into a false sense of security over the winter."

"Or they us," Marhoust said. "They are the ones with a conquered castle under their control and the mines enriching their King! Connall thinks defensively, but I believe that the Thrall already possess what they want."

"Their advance in strength this morning disputes your point. Either way, Connall was chosen by the High Lord and we must be patient and do our duty."

"Hmph!" snorted Marhoust. "Perhaps if we were a bit more impatient we could accomplish something for the heralds to sing of. I have grown tired of that bloody song of Thrall taking Pinixer. The smallfolk may believe the Thrall resorted to cowardly trickery, but we all know our enemy accomplished a magnificent victory – sending two dozen men to scale Pinixer's walls and open the gates for their army that night? That took more mettle than anything I have seen from our side. We need a glorious tale of taking back Pinixer for the heralds to sing about!"

Ophas was silent for a few moments. Marhoust turned his head side to side, cracking the bones in his neck. "Perhaps you are right," Ophas sighed. "But it makes no difference."

Marhoust shook his head. "To my thinking it is very simple. When I vanquish all those of my rank and higher in personal combat, I will have proven myself the most competent warrior and should be declared Lord Commander of the Golden Tide."

Ophas laughed, his eyebrows raised. "You will have to get past me first. And no man has bested Dragis."

"You are both mighty opponents, but just because no one has bested Dragis yet does not mean it cannot be done."

"If you get past me you can think on how to accomplish that task," Ophas smiled.

Marhoust spotted Lord Commander Connall's bay steed coming through the castle gate. "In all honesty, Ophas, why did Aidan choose Connall? You knew Aidan well, did you not?"

"I did, but I cannot say for certain. He was distraught when he heard of Hinrik's assassination."

Marhoust frowned, "But he is now High Lord, ruling the Confederation. He has realized the dream of every nobleman."

Ophas shook his head in disagreement. "Aidan already had his dream - the honor of leading the Golden Tide against Thrall. He had earned his place here. He had no interest in ruling Biel and dealing with the other bickering lords of the Confederation. When the Thrall took Pinixer, he wanted nothing more than to lead the Tide in recapturing it. You did not see his frustration this summer, waiting for the army to form up. But the politics of succession and the rules of the Confederation do not allow the High Lord to be Lord Commander as well."

"I care little for the politics of the Griffin lords," Marhoust said as he spit off to the side. "Aidan would have been a far better Lord Commander than Connall, and in war the best man

should lead.”

Seeing the approach of the Lord Commander, Ophas said, “I tire of explaining politics to you, and you appear unwilling to listen. We should make our way to the command circle. The others are ready.” He turned his horse and galloped ahead.

They pulled up to the Lord Commander and the other heavily ornamented senior knights. They sat astride their mounts at the edge of the battle plain. Nearby, the foot commanders lined up their ragged charges with shouts and threats. The lancers drew up to the right of the foot, their mounts stamping impatiently in the chill air. The knights of the Tide, wearing their golden capes lined with a red fringe, gathered in rows to the left, jesting and keeping watch for their enemy across the plain.

Connall’s head was shaved like most of the other knights, but thick gray eyebrows grew together over his deeply lined eyes. A closely trimmed graying beard failed to hide long scars running down his leathery cheeks. The scars were almost in perfect symmetry, though by all accounts Connall had received them in battles nearly a dozen years apart. Many stories were told of the Commander’s prowess and daring, but Marhoust had seen no sign of such a warrior. To him, Connall simply looked like a tired old man.

Mor Dragis, the Captain of the Tide, rode beside Connall. Dragis was a huge man even by Tide standards, a towering seven-foot tall giant with arms the size of tree trunks. He did not shave his head in the manner of other knights. Curly dark hair tangled down to his shoulders and covered most of the rest of his body like a heavy wool shirt. More than one knight had speculated that his lineage was something other than fully human, but such jests were never made within earshot of Dragis.

Marhoust made eye contact with the enormous knight and recognized the glowering bloodshot eyes of a man who had been deep in his cups when the horns sounded. The Captain’s expression was sour, and as Marhoust and Ophas approached, Dragis’ huge stallion reared up, kicking at the air. With a curse, Dragis regained control over his mount, but he swayed unsteadily in the saddle.

“Knight Marhoust,” Connall greeted him. The biting wind gusted across the plain and Connall shuddered. The lack of control sent a wave of distaste through Marhoust. What if the foot saw their commander trembling?

“Lord Commander.”

“You have worked your way up the List impressively. You will command one squadron of lancers on the right flank. Choose a knight to assist you. Kalin and Herul, you will command the other two squadrons on the left. Ophas and Frankis will have the foot in the center. Dragis will lead the Tide with Woral as Second. You will all await my signal.”

“Shall my squadron advance in line or follow the Tide in the charge,” Marhoust asked.

“There will be no charge or advance unless I order it,” Connall said.

“Lord Commander?”

“The Thrall have chosen this battle,” Connall responded, an edge of irritation rising in his aristocratic voice. “We will wait and see what they have in mind.”

“You intend to let them advance to the edge of Travis?” Marhoust questioned.

Connall replied icily, “I am unsure of their plan, but forcing their foot to wear themselves out crossing the length of the plain cannot aid it.”

“Will it not alarm the townsfolk and Lord Travis to see the enemy so close?” Marhoust pressed. The other knights exchanged uneasy glances. He knew he might be questioning the Lord Commander too much, but there were still many hundreds of folk in the shacks and tents outside the town walls who might panic if the battle raged nearby. Or die if the Tide were pressed back.

Connall’s chapped lips pursed tightly. “Lord Travis does not command this force – that

responsibility is mine. And your responsibility is to follow my orders, which I have given. You will command the lancers of the right flank and await the advance of the Thrall host. You will not advance unless by my order. Now see to your troops.”

Marhoust held his tongue and flipped Broadback’s reigns sharply. He led his horse over to where the knights of the Tide were drawing up in formation. Seeing the familiar blue slashed-line crest of his friend, he yelled, “Cayl! You will second my command of the right lancers!”

Cayl Stremel, Marhoust’s only true friend in the Tide, eagerly put his stirrups to his horse and together they galloped toward the left end of the line. They passed the rows of foot soldiers preparing for battle. Some were withdrawn and stood motionless staring across the plain, others busied themselves tightening their leather vests and arm guards, and still others boisterously yelled encouragement to those around them. Marhoust smiled widely, absorbing their anticipation, until he spotted a group of boys waiting behind the archers. They carried spears and pieces of armor covered their outsized Griffin uniforms, but all looked ready to bolt just at the sight of Marhoust riding toward them.

“Is it my imagination or are those recruits the poorest you have ever seen?” Marhoust asked Cayl, nodding to the skittish troop.

“They are just the reserves,” Cayl said. “Most are younger than we would usually accept. I heard Dragis in the tavern last night claiming that Lord Newcomb sent them here last week. Claimed that waves of tuskar attacks along the merchant routes require him to keep his best men at home, so orphans and runaways are what we get.”

Marhoust scowled, “Tuskar attacks? Here we face an organized army from the largest Empire on the continent, and they worry about tuskars? How can we ever take back Pinixer from the Thrall host with the likes of these men? The first flight of arrows from the Blackbear archers and any that are not skewered will likely take flight.”

“I know,” Cayl said. “But truly, what do you expect us to do? These boys will have to learn to fight sometime. We lost many experienced men with Pinixer. Thrall has near our number of men on the field, even more at Pinixer, and they are hardened warriors. Even if we were to break the host in front of us and advance on and besiege Pinixer, it would be difficult to prevail without every sword we have.”

They reached the troop of lancers and found Truwas, Marhoust’s least favorite weapons master, astride a black stallion at their head. Every recruit deemed worthy of a riding a steed into battle spent some time training from horseback under Truwas’ tutelage. His charges learned mainly through threats and lashings, the latter applied with great enthusiasm if a horse was ever endangered. Marhoust had risen quickly from the lancers to the Golden Tide and never suffered the humiliation of Truwas’ whip, but he still thought the man a churlish taskmaster with maladroitness skills.

“What is this?” Truwas called out dryly as they approached. “The students as masters?”

Marhoust and Cayl pulled up, and Marhoust critically scanned over the assembled lancer troops. They were young, of course, and for most this was likely their first real battle. Many sat stiffly in the saddle, white knuckles on their reins and spears. “We are to command the right wing,” Marhoust said simply.

“How long until the advance?” Truwas asked as he shielded his eyes against the glare from the snow and attempted to see their gathering enemy on the far side of the plain.

“The Lord Commander has decreed that there is to be no advance,” Marhoust said. “He wants to let our enemy advance across the plain.”

“To the castle?” Cayl asked, surprised.

“I believe the Lord Commander hopes for a false alarm,” Marhoust grumbled. “Perhaps he believes our enemy will return to their barracks once they see us waiting for them.”

“Not bloody likely,” Truwas cursed as he spit off to the side. “I heard their assembly

trumpets not long ago. Many trumpets. They will come in force.”

“We will be ready then,” Marhoush stated. “Let us hope we do not all freeze waiting for our esteemed guests.”

Another round of distant trumpets sounded across the plain. The icy breeze blew across the broad battle plain, sending waves of snow swirling about and filling the air with brilliantly bright crystals. Truwas rode among the lancers to line them up and repeat the many rules he so often recited. Cayl also rode through the ranks, asking several men what cities they served and exchanging jests with those he recognized. Marhoush stared across the snowy fields, still as a statue on Broadback.

After several minutes, he could make out a black mass spreading across the white plain. Gusts of wind whipped up the snow and obscured his view of the advancing enemy. Dimly, he heard the shouts from their officers urging the lines onward. Broadback began to snort, his muscles rippling impatiently.

Marhoush glanced down the line of the Griffin army. Ophas and several other knights rode behind three tight lines of foot soldiers. The front two ranks wielded spears and shields while the third rank readied their heavy longbows. It was important to keep the foot in disciplined ranks. Once a line of footmen was broken, cavalry could thunder among them and exact a frightful toll on the panicked men. Behind the foot soldiers rode the bulk of the elite Golden Tide cavalry with the Lord Commander. Dragis would not commit his troops to either flank until he spotted the enemy horse across the field.

It seemed an eternity waiting for the Thrall to draw near. The Griffin army grew silent as each man stared across the plain awaiting the enemy. Connall was a fool. At least marching forward would have given the men something to do. Instead, their army remained as still as pieces on a chess board, each man likely wondering if he would live through the day.

Marhoush stared back impatiently at the advancing Thrall footmen. Their ranks were clearer now, and Marhoush leaned forward in the saddle, unable to believe what he saw. The enemy marched haphazardly in ragged lines, unprepared to defend themselves. If the Tide were to charge now, the Thrall foot would never form a sufficient wall defense in time. Marhoush stood higher in his stirrups to peer over the advancing enemy. The distant wind-whipped snow mostly obscured his view, but there was no sign of Thrall cavalry.

Men on both sides began to yell, and soon the plain was filled with sound of hammering steel and wild oaths. Marhoush looked anxiously towards Connall, hoping that the Lord Commander saw the opportunity and would order a charge. Certainly had Aidan been in command the charge would have been sounded. But the knights of the Golden Tide remained positioned in two straight, defensive lines. Connall was not forming wedges – either he failed to recognize the opportunity or was choosing to ignore it.

“Truwas!” Marhoush called. The lancer weapons master rode up. “Your men have practiced the wedge formation, have they not?”

“A few times,” Truwas replied. “But that is best left to the Tide. My men are new—”

“But they are familiar with the formation,” Marhoush insisted. “Line them up in three wedges. I will take the center, you the right and Cayl the left.”

“Wedges are not a defensive formation,” he said slowly, confused. “They do not allow us to bring maximum spears to bear.”

“I said order the formation!” Marhoush roared. Truwas paused for a moment but turned his horse and began shouting orders to the lancers in clipped sentences as he picked out individual troops to head each group.

Marhoush could now clearly see the disorganized Thrall foot treading across the plain. Some parts of the enemy line were far ahead of others. Winded from their long charge in full armor, their

boisterous yells were subsiding. Marhoust heard Connall's voice shout over the clamor, but he could not make out his words. The Tide remained in their defensive lines.

"Marhoust?" Cayl's voice asked at his left shoulder. "What are you doing? I thought—"

"We are going to charge," Marhoust cried. He no longer felt the sting of the cold wind on his face or the chill in his fingers. Instead, blood pumped through his veins.

"But you said the Lord Commander —" Cayl began.

"The Lord Commander is an old fool who fails to see an opportunity!" Marhoust snapped, his fierce blue eyes never leaving the advancing enemy. "Look at the Thrall lines. They are exhausted and disorganized. If we smash forward in a wedge they will break in moments and we can chase them back across the entire plain, cutting them to pieces!"

The Griffin troops jeered and yelled insults at the advancing host in a continuous cacophony of sound. "It is folly to advance before Connall signals," Cayl yelled. Marhoust looked at his friend's face and saw his concern, but he shut out the questions that began to form in his mind.

"You are the left wedge," Marhoust commanded. Behind him the lancers were drawn into position, their faces a mix of determination and fear beneath their gleaming helmets. "You are with me!" he yelled to them. "If you remain in a tight formation we will break those bastards!" Turning back to Cayl he called, "The left. Now!"

Marhoust saw Connall behind the footmen gesturing wildly and shouting at one of his attendants. The attendant spurred his horse towards Marhoust's position.

Marhoust glanced back at the enemy. He could visualize his men smashing against the ragged line of Thrall footmen. The enemy would break and run, and his men would cut the Thrall down all the way across the plain. With another glance at the attendant riding hell-bent for him, he raised his sword and bellowed, "Lancers with me!"

He spurred Broadback forward and behind him he heard the shouts of the lancers. Out of the corners of his eyes he saw Cayl and Truwas spur their own mounts forward, their men riding behind them in rough formation.

With shouts of alarm, the front line of enemy soldiers saw the charge from their flank and abruptly stopped their advance. Confusion reigned as soldiers behind stumbled into the front rank. Some were sent sprawling onto the snowy ground. Others clumped into groups shouting at one another. A very few tried to form a defensive wall against the horses bearing down on them.

A fierce grin spread over Marhoust's face. The enemy was in disarray! With quick glances to the sides, he saw Truwas and Cayl galloping in front of their own wedges, screaming insults at the enemy, their gleaming swords held high. Behind the Griffin footmen Marhoust thought he glimpsed the huge form of Dragis readying the Tide to join the charge.

Within a few horse-lengths of the Thrall footmen Marhoust reached up and clanged his visor closed. The front lines of the Thrall foot panicked – turning to run, throwing their spears wildly, or simply dropping to the ground in fear as the slashing swords and spears were leveled toward them.

With a roar Marhoust crashed through the front line of enemy troops. Two Thrall foot went down under Broadback's rush, their screams of pain drowned out by the rising crash of metal. Marhoust slashed his sword left and right, laughing wildly as he watched arcs of blood spray up from his sliced foes. Within seconds he had ridden through the Thrall foot, and in the distance he spied a line of Thrall cavalry riding hard for him.

He pulled up on Broadback's reins and turned to bring his wedge back through the retreating Thrall troops. He veered, and a sword slashed out at him from where his lead lancer should have been riding. He barely parried the blow with his own weapon, then turned to see a Thrall footman standing below him. The footman, having lost the element of surprise, turned to flee. Marhoust let him go and squinted through the limited vision of his visor. He rode alone.

Turning back, he saw his men scattered along a thin line of Thrall troops who had somehow

held their positions. A number of lancers had fallen, their horses screaming and flailing in the snow. Instead of following him through, the lancers had reined up and engaged in melee! Cursing their lack of discipline, Marhoust suddenly realized that he was surrounded by enemy troops. Most attempted to run by him, ducking in panic to avoid his blade. But several realized that their lines had held and they turned towards him, their faces masks of hate as they shouted for blood.

Marhoust spurred Broadback back towards the Griffin lines and swung his blade wildly about him. The warhorse screamed in fury, his kicking front legs splitting the face of an enemy who dared to get too close. But the ring of enemy troops around him raised their shields and slashed at Broadback's legs. The valiant horse surged forward through the crowd as the Thrall troops screamed and continued their assault from all sides. Marhoust's eyes searched desperately for help as he tried to maintain control of the bucking beast. He was only yards from the lancers when he heard Cayl shout his name over the din.

A Thrall spear slipped through the ringed mail on Broadback's neck and released a dark spray of blood. The mighty horse screamed and collapsed. Marhoust was pitched to the side like a huge boulder, his fall broken by the bodies of his assailants falling under him, their bones cracking beneath his enormous armored weight. He landed on his back and somehow held on to his sword, but within moments Thrall warriors leapt on top of him, shrieking insults, thrilled at the chance to kill a helpless knight. He roared and swung his sword aimlessly above him. With gruesome satisfaction he felt it bite into the flesh of his enemy.

A clash on the side of his helmet stunned his senses and shifted his visor, obscuring his vision even more. More enemy troops jumped on top of him and pinioned him down. He was helpless. Blades dug into the seams of his armor, searching for a place to pierce through the ringed mail shirt. Furious at his fate, he roared again helplessly.

Unbidden, a phrase from his youth came to him. "Bear your pain well." A wandering priest, with a tangled beard, soiled robe and dirty feet who occasionally visited the castle of Lord Bates. Learning of young Marhoust's dreams of knighthood, the old man with stale breath had intoned, "Bear your pain well. For once the gods see fit to remove you from this life, it will be all peace and comfort. Peace and comfort."

There was no peace or comfort now. Marhoust felt an enormous impact pummel his side, and a spray of blood splashed through his visor. He groaned in agony but the weights on his arms were suddenly gone. Through his crooked visor he saw a horse circle over him. Cayl's voice yelled orders as someone grabbed Marhoust's arms and lifted him up. The pain in his side wracked him, but he was standing again. He quickly reached up and yanked off his helmet. With his tattered golden cloak he wiped the sweat and blood from his eyes. Cayl stood next to him and swung his blade in an arc to keep away a semi-circle of cursing Thrall foot troops. Several other lancers, also on foot, were gathered about him. Truwas was still mounted, rearing his steed at the enemy to keep them at bay.

"Back to the lines!" Cayl screamed. With Truwas covering them on the horse, the small troop backed out of the melee. The once pristine snow-covered plain was now trampled into muddy swaths and dotted with patches of crimson snow that steamed from the muddied ground. Wounded men begged for help or reached out with hands to grasp at legs as men tripped over them. If the pleas were from a Thrall man, the lancers quickly ended his suffering with a thrust of their blade. If the man wore Griffin colors, they grabbed him and dragged him back toward their lines, trailing bloody smears along the ground.

The Thrall began pulling back as well. The battle was over. Marhoust and the lancers stopped to catch their rasping breaths. Marhoust bent over, gripping his side. He was covered in blood from head to foot. A huge dent in the side of this armor bore the mark of a horse's hoof, likely from Truwas' horse as it jumped astride him. There were bright scratches at the seams of his

armor where the Thrall warriors had tried to pierce him through with their blades. He could not yet tell if any of the blood that covered him was his own. Cayl stood beside him, steam rising in clouds about his head, his armor covered with smeared gore. He had lost his helmet and there was a bloody gash on his left temple. He wiped absently at the flowing blood as he scanned the field for remaining Thrall footmen.

"The Thrall retreat," Truwas noted grimly, dismounting next to them. While his armor was also covered by streaks of blood, he appeared unharmed. "The Lord Commander has sounded a regrouping, although it looks as if Dragis continues to harry the enemy."

"A victory?" Marhoust rasped. His side throbbed painfully.

"Yes," Cayl breathed, surveying the bodies around them. "Certainly a victory."

"But our losses were heavy," Truwas stated, his voice hard. The old weapons master, sweat steaming off him, aimed an accusing stare at Marhoust. He took a step towards Marhoust and spit at his feet. "I tried to tell you the men were not ready to fight in that formation—"

"If they had held the wedge we would have exacted double the losses," Marhoust insisted.

"If you had obeyed the Lord Commander we would have suffered half!" Truwas countered, jaw jutted out, fists clenched as if to strike. "Men are dead because they were taken off their horse! Because they rode in the wrong formation!"

Marhoust raised his fist and raged, "If they had held their formation—"

"They were new—"

"Then their trainer is at fault!" Marhoust barked. With an enraged growl, Truwas charged, drawing back his fist.

"Enough!" Cayl yelled. He wrapped himself around the struggling weapons master and pulled him into the other lancers who helped restrain him.

"The Lord Commander approaches," one of the lancers murmured.

Feeling a touch of dread, Marhoust looked up. Connall, with Ophas at his side, galloped up to them. The two knights reined their horses in and halted. Marhoust gritted his teeth against the pain and stood up a little straighter.

The Lord Commander reached up to lift his visor, his eyes blazing with fury.

"Marhoust," he declared. "Your orders were clear."

The pain in Marhoust's side grew with each ragged breath. But he met the Lord Commander's gaze and held it, willing himself not to respond. The attack had not gone as he had envisioned, but it had still been the right thing to do.

The Lord Commander stared down at him. The horses whinnied with impatience. The sounds of combat were quickly fading, replaced with the cries of wounded men.

Connall finally spoke. "You will be taken into custody and confined. Truwas, Cayl, take this man's weapon and escort him to a cell in Castle Travis. See his wounds are treated and that he is fed. There he will await my summons on charges of disobeying the Lord Commander's order."

The Lord Commander turned his horse and galloped off towards the reforming lines of the foot. After a second of hesitation, Ophas followed without a word.

For a moment, Marhoust's mind raced. He wanted to explain himself, but the harsh reality of the Commander's words struck him dumb. His plan was strategically sound. It would have worked if only the lancers had followed . . .

Without a word, he handed his sword to Cayl. He could not look his friend in the eye as he turned and began limping back towards the castle, each step causing a flash of pain that thankfully drove the angry questions from his mind.